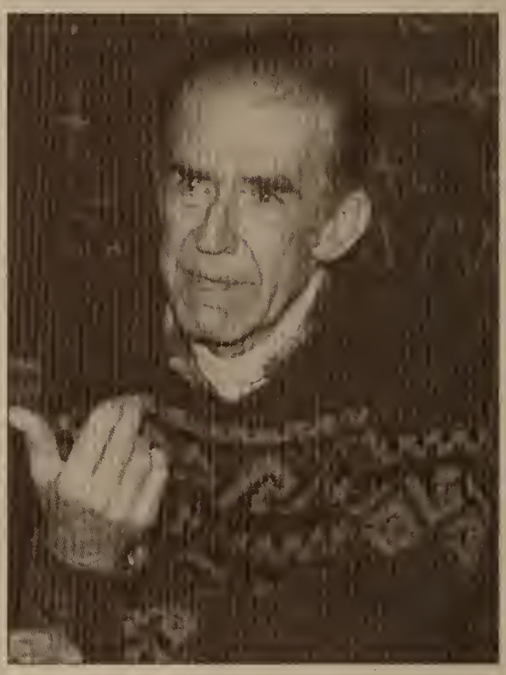
Charles B.

Tinkham

Selected Poems

CHARLES B. "CHARLIE" TINKHAM...



...was born May 11, 1929 in Hammond, Indiana. At the age of six, he was sent to live in Florida with his grandparents, who eventually became frequent subjects in his poetry. He earned his bachelor's degree in English and philosophy from the University of Chicago at age 19 and later gained a second undergraduate degree in botany from the University of Wisconsin. Tinkham became a professor of creative writing at Purdue University Calumet and also taught classes in art, literature, music, and philosophy during his forty-five year career. His publications included over 2,000 poems, and three verse collections, *Latin Sun* (1988) with its focus on Mexico, and two collaborations with the late Robert E. Nichols, Jr., *A Year Among the Wildflowers of Purdue University Calumet* (1994) and *A Year Among the Trees of Purdue University Calumet* (1995). Tinkham was the faculty advisor for *Skylark*, Purdue University Calumet's literary publication, for twenty-five years. Among the awards he garnered were the Hammond Achievement Award (1986), the Purdue University President's Medal for outstanding achievement and service to the university (1998), induction into the Purdue Calumet Hall of Fame (1999), and the President's Award for Dedication to Higher Education (1999). Tinkham achieved all this in spite of suffering from cerebral palsy throughout his life. He died in Gary, Indiana, on January 24, 2003, survived by his wife Maria Lourdes Tinkham and numerous stepchildren and step-grandchildren.

CHARLES B. TINKHAM: *Selected Poems*

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And finally, thank you, Charles B. Tinkham, for your profound legacy as writing mentor and poet.

—**Gordon Stamper Jr.**, EDITOR

FOREWORD by Gordon Stamper Jr.

Many former Purdue Calumet students remember Charles Tinkham's generosity of time and spirit, whether meeting him to discuss their creative writing work in his trademark cluttered office or to talk about current events and life philosophy in the campus student lounges. During the academic year 2001-2002, I had the good fortune of having a standing appointment on Mondays with Charlie to critique my latest poetic works and thoughtfully analyze 9/11 and its troubling aftershocks. From those times, I carry a critical eye for what works or does not work in creative writing and carefully consider what I hear, read, and see in the news media.

His legacy in my life also includes my time as a *Skylark* reader and staff member in the 90's. Charlie's inherent sense of quality as the publication's faculty advisor permeated the editing and selecting process of its staff members. My experience as a selection reader, and special section and prose editor for the Purdue Calumet literary publication, was invaluable for my current careers of writing, editing, and teaching composition students.

Charlie had a tremendous influence on many lives as professor of creative writing, and as a generous and kind human being. But sometimes the legacy of him as a key literary figure of the Calumet region is lost among these memories. This volume of work and remainder of this foreword will focus on the skills of Charles Tinkham, prolific and talented poet, while also acknowledging the advisor, friend, and highly functional survivor of disability.

Tinkham authored over 4,000 poems in his lifetime, around 2,000 of them in publication, making his inability to write a poem for his grandmother while he was a boy a great irony. Eventually he wrote around 30 poems dedicated to her, several featured here in the *People* section of this anthology.

A large number of Purdue Calumet alumni and faculty will remember Tinkham's celebratory poems honoring both friends and famous people, living and deceased. One of his more touching tributes was to his colleague and friend Dr. Robert Nichols, professor of linguistics, who also had a shared passion for botany

with Tinkham, collaborating on two volumes, *A Year Among the Wildflowers of Purdue Calumet*, and *A Year Among the Trees of Purdue Calumet*. Appropriately Tinkham referred to his friend's love of nature and Mormon faith in the elegiac "in memory of Robert Nichols":

Your spirit
Hovers here,
A gardener
Of blessings
And gratitude
For the miracle work
Of God

With equal power, Tinkham wrote of the beauties of nature, of personal relationships, current social issues, and eternal states of the human condition. In "girl on the square," he paints a word portrait of a child as the face of need and poverty in the shadow of indifference:

...and what do you do
with the little frown
that plays like a moth
about her eyes?

it is accusatory
it says, "I am hungry!"
or the eyes say
"I am your daughter"

and you watch
the pigeons
circling high
above the towers
of the cathedral

One of Tinkham's greatest works is his brief but profound meditation on the Dust Bowl era and in times of famine, "in the time of the drought," with its haunting conclusion mixed with his concern for humanity and the images of nature he crafted so well:

in a dry time
you are folded down
like a folded
forgotten blossom

Associated by many of his readers as a poet of light, Tinkham could also explore the dark side of human nature. An activist for the homeless, he frequently contributed to the Chicago publication *Streetwise*. In "slipped beyond you," he begins his observations with the romantic and spiritual naturalism of a lyrical poet:

I have slept
under the stars,
the high and turning
summer stars
gazing down at me
like a mystic
nature father . . .

But eventually he jars the readers as a spokesman for the ignored and impoverished in our world in the last stanza:

I say to you—
I have slipped
beyond you—
I am the homeless
of this world

Even barflies get their due soliloquies in Tinkham's world. The monologue poem "In the Bar" is the ravings of a drunken protagonist, in a love and mostly hate relationship with her mother:

At least my husband hasn't left me,
And where is yours?
Yes, mama, if you're so proud
And beautiful, where is he?
Where is your man, mama.
Mama, you know what, mama?
I hate you, mama.
I hate you, mama.
Bartender, where the hell are you?

And maybe this inebriated outcry comes from very recent loss; Tinkham leaves some ambiguity to let the reader decide and add some sympathy for an otherwise loudmouth drunk:

You think you can fool me
With that stone on top of you,
And those little wilted flowers?
But I know you.
You're too clever to die,
Ain't you, mama?
No, no: I know you.
Bartender, where the hell are you!

Perhaps Tinkham's sympathy for those seen by many in society as the derelict and downtrodden came from his own physical infirmities. The late Dr. Robert Nichols described Charles Tinkham as "a beautiful soul in a twisted body." Charlie consistently overcame the limitations of cerebral palsy and served as an inspiration to those with or without disabilities. He recognized his opportunity to be an example in "Diagnosis: c.p.":

I too am history—
I can teach patience,
I can inspire faith,
I can introduce you
to the practice
of love

However, Charlie never had a problem with hubris. The final words of his poem "privilege" display both Charlie's humility and his realization that life was a continuous educational experience. We who knew him—friends, colleagues, and family—received invaluable instruction on "learning to live" by a true expert in that field, Charles Tinkham.

and eventually, through all
this growing,
you discover that everybody,
being human,
is handicapped by the problem
of learning to live wisely:

more properly called
the privilege of learning
to love wisely

Note: the editors are grateful to both Charlie and longtime *Skylark* editor Pamela Hunter for sharing with us the method of organization—*Mexico, Nature, People, Religion,* and *Miscellaneous*—that this anthology follows.

CHARLIE'S VOICE by Kristin Jensen

I knew Charlie first as the owner of the office cluttered and piled high with books and papers, leaving only enough room for the desk and typewriter stand they surrounded and a single chair next to the door. No one was sitting at the desk the first time I glanced into the space and wondered who the owner was, what he or she looked like.

It was not long before I found out who owned the infamous office I'd pass on the way to meet with my teaching mentor, excited and freaked out at my new and sudden responsibility for classrooms of students on top of a load of graduate courses. The sight of Charlie surrounded by his piles made me grin and feel at ease, a funny contrast to my effort to be uber-organized out of fear. If my mind sometimes skipped in my early grad school nervousness and I blanked out on which set of offices held that of my teaching mentor's, I could find it by following the fragrance of patchouli past Charlie's office door.

Charlie was always on campus, often on the second floor of the Lawshe Hall where most of my classes were held and where I taught and met with students, fellow classmates, and professors. I routinely passed him in the hallway and smiled, and he'd respond with lifted eyebrows and a nod and hello. By then I knew he was a poet–the resident poet–and creative writing teacher, and this interested me because I'd fallen in love with writing in grade school (and had never been able to get over it).

Cerebral palsy had given Charlie a certain style to his locomotion, and I'd listen for the particular rhythm of his steps in the hallway as I waited for the elevator. I was a little nervous to get into conversation with him because CP had also accented his speech, and the confidence in my ability to decipher even heavily accented English was challenged by him. But he did speak to me and was patient when I, in my embarrassment, needed him to repeat himself, and I learned to relax my ears to his accent and hear his gently sarcastic jokes and musings in their entirety. I liked his gentle sarcasm. I liked his blue eyes. I liked that he made me wonder if he sometimes dyed his hair.

Even on weekends, just as grad students were ever present, so was Charlie, seated in his office or a campus lounge, listening to what I thought were the poems and stories of his current students. He encouraged voices hidden in the neighborhoods surrounding the university, living among the working and abandoned factories and mills of the Calumet region, and farther out, voices from the rural farm and former farm towns. Later I realized not all were current students, but simply habitual writers. Charlie's generosity extended beyond university enrollment lists and into the community.

I was allowed two electives in addition to the required courses for the Master's degree in English, so I enrolled in a summer session creative writing course with Charlie. Graduate school was a stimulating time for me, and I enjoyed the scholarly challenges of critical philosophy and teaching theory, but I was shy in my classes at first and intimidated by classmates whose undergraduate work seemed more applicable than my mere minor in English. I have always needed and found (almost always with a struggle) a place to be free to imagine, and at Purdue Calumet, I found the safe place in Charlie's office, where we'd meet and I'd read my work to him, a requirement for the summer course. Then for an independent study. Then on Saturdays when I was no longer a student.

In his crowded office, I settled into the reading chair for discussions of characters who became real as Charlie asked for the details of their lives and their stories began to take shape. We talked characters to life in that space; they sat with us. He justified my need for expression and development of my voice, and I felt alive when I'd sit in the chair in his office and read to him.

I wish I were at a point where I could write this as someone who has learned from and nailed Charlie's example. The truth is that I still struggle to make writing, my personal writing, legitimate in my life. It seems both childish that I seek others to legitimize my need for expression and egotistical to think I should be able to write creatively without any support or even to write at all. My middle-class values stress practicality, conformity, and humility, not the freedom to create or to take oneself seriously as a creative person.

I am neither an expert on Charlie, nor on writing. I can only explain that spending time with him gave me and still gives me encouragement to express myself creatively. He took my voice seriously, which is something I have struggled with my whole life. Reading his poems has the same effect. It reaffirms and shows me in detail the importance of experiencing life deeply and reflecting on it.

For many years, I have earned my living primarily as a technical writer and copy editor, and you might think that these extremely detail-oriented jobs would influence my creative work. I'm sure they do—on a good day I write clearly and directly; on a bad day I write correctly and without style, without a voice. I did put my editorial skills to use when I helped my partners in this project organize the original batch of poetry into thematic categories, and there were neat stacks, file folders, and manila envelopes. But in private, when I was alone with the poems, trying to choose which I thought everyone needed to hear, I sat on the rug in my apartment and read and read, and I heard Charlie's voice. Before I knew it, I'd surrounded myself with the pages, poems spread all around me in a circle. It felt like I was sitting with him in his office in that beloved chair among those stacks of papers, some of which I'm sure were copies of poems included in this volume, only this time I was listening. It was so surprising and shocking the way his voice was in my head, how certain lines would elicit a memory of his gestures when he looked thoughtful or when he made a joke.

I found myself wondering about Charlie the writer—why he spent his time on poetry in a world so impatient for something like that and how this related to encouraging all those other voices who offered images and ideas with a greatness all their own, or the potential for greatness, or no greatness at all but a need to be heard. Charlie was able to meet the challenge of listening through our barriers of inexperience, fear, and ego, and he guided and encouraged us, which surely must have taken great patience and a great sense of humor.

I never had a conversation with Charlie about CP. What I know of his feelings about CP comes from what others have said–mainly, that he never complained–and from his poetry. While CP did not define Charlie, it was an obvious fact of his life, and perhaps partly because of society's difficulty to accept a deviation from its "norm," I imagine that his writing may have started with a desire to be listened to and understood.

I also imagine that if I were to speak candidly with the writers who took a seat next to the kind poet to spend time creating stories and listening to the sounds of language together, many would list this desire among their reasons for writing. I have found that writing expressively connects me to the world and to my own life. It sets free a different kind of voice, one that is more courageous and graceful than my

speaking voice and unencumbered by physical embarrassments and social limitations. I wonder if this is what Charlie found in writing and in others struggling to find their voices.

During this project, I realized the generosity of Charlie the poet. What he gave in the expression of what he saw and attempted to make sense of has enriched my life and expanded my ability to experience. Until I spent more time with Charlie's voice, I never thought pine needles could whet and sharpen the air in winter. I never thought yellows had such vast hues.

I hope you will slow down and spend some of your time letting Charlie's voice seep in. Slow down and listen to the sounds of his language and envision his images. Like his students, you'll gain a deeper understanding of the value of patience and imagination.

Please have a seat. Welcome.

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Mexico

1910

beside a creosote bush
I found you in the desert
half buried in the sand

I sat down beside you
to talk to you
you did not reply
you were frozen
in the sands of eternity

a heaven? a father?
the rivers of paradise?

were you a fighter
for Pancho Villa?
a prospector
lost in the thirst for gold?

it was very cold
and twilight was moving in
like a blue blanket

I said hello to you
again, you did not answer
your eyes were hollow
and the rest of you
was bleached bone

you must have died
in the revolution of 1910
and nobody had discovered you
to honor you
with a ceremony of funeral

you rode across history
and history had killed you
you are nameless to me
and now as the wind blows
and the sun sweeps
history will never give
you a name

in this growing dark
I wish I had an emperor
to bury beside you

1988

up the slope
of yard grown
with the crippled
summer grass
of drought,
in a long-afternoon
shadow of live oak,
were two campesinos
and a dark
almost buried
stone
that spoke to us
two whitewashed words—

in the windless
dry day,
as from the hollow
of a child's stomach,
they called out to us:
VIVA ZAPATA!
and stung our eyes to tears
as dark
as the roots
of maize—
we smiled
and waved back
from the window
of the bus—

in return,
nothing—
except for a merest motion:
was it the trembling
of a hand?
a stir of wind
in the leaves
of the oak?
the collapse
of an empire?

in the next village
we watched
as a little girl
in a plain white dress
carried a pail
of water
past bold painting
on a cracked
building side—
CARLOS SALINAS DE GOTARI—
our bus
trembled on
along the road

Amerindian girl

(edge of Mexico City)

in your confirmation dress
white as angel wings
you ascend
the refuse heap
to your home
on the ridge—

birds circle low
and rats
sleek as hunger
lurk brown and gray—
on the horizon
clouds gather,
then dissolve

your father
is a bricklayer;
your mother
is a laundress;
you are a schoolgirl
rising across garbage
to a celebration
of corn, and beans,
and chili peppers

it is hot here,
there is no shade,
even today
God casts no shadow

at Teotihuacan

from the high corners of the earth
as if from gods poised splendid there—
east and west and north and south—
wind drives
hard and blue, without shadow,
without manifest form,
gathering to power,
speaking words
that will not bear translation

sun sweeps the high plateau
from the ancient temple
of the sky,
careening down
the spillway
of unmeasured time—

everything is gold:
we walk the avenues
like royalty
dressed and splendid,
the two of us
bound by light
to secrets
we can never understand
or tell

we are lost in figures
of the human—
but cradled in the arms
of wind and sun
forever prying
at the silences
of earth,
forever crafting
the majesty
of soul

Avenida 5

he is brown, and
dark, and gold—
furrowed
with a history
of mountains,
terraces,
and temples,
furrowed
with the play
of ancient winds,
the deadly blades
of treachery

every evening
on Avenida 5,
as the sun
falls along
the stoneware streets
of Cordoba,
he blows
his golden saxophone—
the echo
of a sorrow
and a gladness
never felt before

it comes to him
out of a thousand rains,
out of a wind
that works its way
through snow-steep
ravaged mountains,
out of a thousand, thousand
golden pinnacles
of sun

saxophone
on Avenida 5

Aztec

night has come
to the mountains

the lavenders
of darkness
have fallen
across the mountains

the moon,
a little pearl
in the sky
is climbing
through the dark
petal-blue light

I sit in Chapultepec Park
and I dream
my way back
to one of the great
empires of the sun
the shining unconquerable
eternal city
of Tenochtitlan

the temples spring high
canals of gleaming water
interlace
the island
with promises
of another undaunted day

birds of radiant plumage
fill the air
with rhapsodies
of life
and flowerboats
drift upon the lake
with imperturbable beauty
the water floats
with petals
that sting the eye
like diamonds—

the two benevolent tyrants
the sun god
and the rain god
undertake
the dawning
and the nurture
of another Aztec day

on an iron bench in Chapultepec Park
I wake
from an undying
dream
under a little pearl
of moon

begging

she gazes at me
with eyes
blacker and more gold
than summer berries,
her hair
darker
than time
imprisoned in the stone
of the temple
of the sun

in her hand
held out
for the alloy
of pesos
I see the pallor
of the Gulf's sand dollar,
the openness
and fragile trust
of butterfly wings
gleaming
in a rain forest

but the emperors
have come
riding
their bright bulldozers,
and everything falls,
everything falls,
and hands
curl down
to nothing,
to nothing

castanets

night has gathered in
the stars are high

the voices of the women
are like flowers
waiting for the brush
of springtime

the voices
of the children
are the curious questions
inspired by their longing
and the music
is the gathering in
of all desire

in the high trees
the blossoms
freshened in a sudden wind
begin to stir
and petals break and scatter
through the air
and the women
in their diamond black
of hair
catch the petals
in their reaching hands

slowly, slowly
the platform begins to shake,
begins to sway—
the nailed heel
begins to strike—
in a lightning
like the light
of dream
castanets explode
to the rhythm
of the distant stars

the hearts of the dancers
skip across
the questions
of eternity

Cholula

I wish I could give them
two red kites
so that they could
run down the road with them
flying behind

I wish I could give them
the gold spillway of sun,
the kiss of the rain,
the fine blue sweep
of the day

I want to give them
the mysteries
of hummingbird,
the green height
of pine wind,
the ripeness
of mango
in the warmth
of a hand

they are two
little dark boys,
Totonac,
peering at us
from around
the hurt ridges
of cactus;
they are shy
and do not speak

their eyes
are shadows
of a question,
and their arms
are thin
as the stems
of dried flowers

they look at us

Cordoba

sunrise
is a shadowing
and light
on the snows
of far mountains

it is a building
of lavender
through a silence
of skies

it is women
bringing their plants
and caged birds
out into light
of blue areaways

in badges
of color
it is schoolgirls
walking together
through a history
of streets

it is yellows
and oranges
and umber-greens
of the market
where dew still clings
like jewels
of time's birth

it is the time
of the gathering
of voices
on the square—
from the whisper
of Cuauhtemoc
to the shy
petalled drift
of unanswered children

untitled

deep in you
is a glowing flower,
is a season
called spring,
is a warmth
like the warmth
the sparrow knows
when he tumbles
in the dust of May

in the springtime
I watch you
in the early sun
as it makes of you
a silhouette
of purest concentration

in a rapt mood,
bent like a flower
toward the coming
of dawn,
you pore
over the pages
of a magic tale,
light glowing all about you,
a tiara
of Monte Alban blossoms
gleaming
in your hair,
the colors
of Oaxaca sun
transforming
your deeply human heart

dreams—southern Mexico

the sun
is a broom
of bright straw

it wakes
the children
who sleep
in areaways
between old
Spanish buildings
and it sweeps them away

the porter
with broom in his hands,
says, "Get, now! Get, now!"
and the children,
their dreams still dark
in their eyes,
scatter out
across the square
spinning
like dust devils
before a coming storm

face down

three little sapling
poplars
grow here
by the water
of the river

their leaves
catch the light
of the sun
in a little fire
of the morning

ten feet away
a plastic pouch
bobs unluckily
on the water

it carries a wallet,
a toothbrush,
the worn picture
of a girl
wearing a wedding dress

some distance away
face down
a body floats
young and male and silent

the late moon
looks down
like a ghost
from the long
long desert
and only the scurry
of a rat
between creosote bushes
can tell us
what kind of world
this is

someone has disappeared forever
along the history
of the Rio Bravo
with no one
to speak
the syllables
of his blessed name

friends and companions

forever
you ride
with the Sun-God
in all his glory
as he sweeps
from the twilight
of morning
to the twilight
of evening

you are accorded
this holy house
because you died
giving birth
to a child

you chose death
to give birth to life—
you suffered pain
and all the agony
of pain
to bring forth life

you gathered matter
from the four corners
of the earth
and you shaped
this matter
into the essence
of life

there is no greater
sacrifice
than this

now, eternally,
you travel
with the Sun-God
and he takes you
by the hand
and keeps you warm
through all the high
mysteries of time

the earth
and all its skies
have blessed you
for all eternity

(The Aztecs believed that a
woman who died in childbirth
traveled forevermore across skies
with the Sun-God himself.)

girl in the park

in my mind
I see you once again
(or else
you have been visible
to me
all along,
only I have not noticed)

you are sitting
on a metal bench
in Chapultepec,
slowly swinging your legs—
they are the color
of sun and bronze and gold

you are smooth
as weathers
of the spring mountains
and a smile
blossoms in your eyes

who are you?
where is your mother?

you are a Zapotec girl
living at the edge
of the rain forest—
your mother
is a cook
working for pesos
in the Pink District

she is lame and she is sick
but she may have
a golden orange
for you tonight

bulldozers
make dark tracks
through the rain forest

girl on the square

her eyes haunt me—
they are big
and liquid and
glowing black

they are sad,
but curious too,
asking, "Why don't you buy
my Chiclets?"

the corners
of her mouth
are drawn down,
and what do you do
with the little frown
that plays
like a moth
about her eyes?

it is accusatory,
it says, "I am hungry!"
or the eyes say
"I am your daughter"

and you watch
the pigeons
circling high
above the towers
of the cathedral

untitled

I am old,
I walk the streets alone—
through a dusk
of ancient flowers

at my feet
shadows gather
into pools
of night

I am alone
and I am old—
I walk beside
the gleaming thunder
of Popocatepetl

I do not surrender

(after a painting by Diego Rivera, in which Zapata is shown buried in a field of maize)

I surrender to earth
it holds me
close as a warm hand

I lie in the rich close
earth
and roots
of the maize
gather about me—
my head,
my trunk,
my feet—

I dream
of germinating
with the spring
I shall become
a rich silver blade
of maize

the wind
and the sun
and the rain
will caress me
I will become a sword
of sharp clean feeling
swaying personably
with the wind—

the women
working with hoes
will brush up against me
with their bare arms
and their songs—
I will be a single
blade of maize
myself—
to inspire
endless armies
of campesini
to march
to the National Palace
and say, "I am Zapata
I am the sun
and the leaf
of my people."

untitled

I knew you for the splendor
of an afternoon
and six or seven brief days,
yet in that time
beneath the curved blue
mountain sky
of Mexico, you took us
on an odyssey to God

past young and old,
the wealthy and the poor,
through noise of streets
and silences of heart,
we walked

along pavements cobbled
with summer sun,
along the fervent voices
of children selling chiclets,
you led our way
to God's own house

the Basilica rose high before us,
the Cathedral wavered in a mist
of August heat,
flowers grew
up hillsides of the heart,
and with your lips
and the wonder of your eyes
we learned to pray again
for an order and a blessing
in this world,
for a sense of love
enriched with epochs
of the steady sun

*Indian village**

twilight

slow and lavender
the moon moves
over the river

silver as
the underside of leaf
fish leap
from great dark pools

the Indian girl
on the craggy overhang
is a slim ghost-like presence—

she is at one
with darkness
and moon—

at one
with water
and rock—

a horse neighs
in the distance

the mango tree
is still as stone

ancient Father,
tell us the meaning
of beauty

**See "Zapotec village," p. 35.*

Juarez—1990

pigeons bob
iridescent
on the square

a rose
droops
in the ancient garden

a little girl,
glazed with dust
of drought,
sells Chiclets

the morning sun,
almost frozen
in the east,
turns white
in the wispy hair
of an old, old man
asleep
on a metal bench

a half-rusted
sprinkler
has ceased
to turn

overhead,
against a careless
wash of sky,
pitted
with the green
of time,
Juarez bends
silent and forgotten
across the worn years

untitled

Kernan
and his Spanish warriors,
buckled and glistening
and musketed,
furrowed the seas,
stormed the coasts,
and ravaged the jungles,
flower and bird
and sun-god

they were looking
for gold
and missed it,
misunderstood it—
they were blind
as swords

for gold
lay all around them—
it lay in the light
of the sun—
on the petals
of every flower,
on the blur
of hummingbird wings,
on the children
playing
in the dry stream bed,
on Sierra Madre
reaching
toward the western sky

they were blind
and they did not see

Mexico adentro

Como sinuoso
andar
de culebra
serpentea
el Tonto
rico y verdoso
y de un morado pedregoso
por entre peñas muy antiguas.

Anochece,
y el agua
nacida de manantial argentino
ondula
remolinando corrientes sombrías
con fuerzas
que luego escurren
oscuridades más profundas
que los peces irisados.

Una canoa
llega desde
estrechos altos,
acuchillando
la piel del agua
y conjura
al indio misterioso,
silencioso,
hacia aún otra
edad bendita del sol.

Mexico City—morning scene

she has tied
some leaves of the lemon tree
to the end
of a crooked branch,
and beneath the willows
of her high-blue morning
she sweeps
a little corner
of her universe

birds sing for her,
out of one dark eye
a cat watches her,
and the sun begins
to build
toward the gold of noon

her dress,
an old, old cotton print,
swings against her thin legs
and her face is as still
as some long-forgotten ritual

she goes now
to sit upon a bench
and somewhere in her broken profile
is stern Aztec
unbidden and defiant

she says nothing
and moves through
the ages of the sun

untitled

Moonlight
lies in pearls
upon the grass,
upon the stones
of the winding
mountain path,
on the green
green expanse
of the banana leaves
bathed in cool
night air

the stars
are a cascade
of blossoms
across the sky,
a garden
of petalled light
quiet
as unspoken words

far below,
in the concourse
of the human,
in the dusty road
where history
curls itself to rest each night,
summer children
play beside
great fields
of maize

from just beyond
the darkened stalks
of plants,
in the curious Eden
of dust and immortality,
the sleepless eyes
of Zapata
gaze upon
the dreaming hungers
of this world

para Fabiola

quiero que el sol
te tenga calientita
y que te sonría
como el oro escuro
en tus ojos

quiero que las flores
abran para ti
como los colores
de un arco iris
en el cielo
de tu imaginación

quiero que cada día
te abrace
y te triaga
cada día
más felicidad
y que te sicretea
la historia del amor

con cariño

untitled

the faint green
flicker of palmetto
wavering
at the edge
of dawn

the ribbed
glowing
inner shell
of waking day

off-shore gulls
silver
on the brightened sky—
rising and dipping
on a pearled
blue strand
of wind

the rushing
sun-spilled green
of waves
breaking up
the white-spun sand

the long-leaf
pine
leaning
to its image
on the shore

the earth
drifting
like a buoy
in the beauty
of space

the great charro

the world
is a lovely, lonely place—
that which has been
can never be again—

rivers, mountains,
deserts—
they all change—
never to be again—

but at the back
of my mind
I still see Zapata
I hear him speak to me

the great charro,
the rebel,
the anarchist—
the man
afraid of nothing—
not death itself—

his eyes are sharp
as darts—
he never smiles,
he is murderous

his great white steed
neighs nervously
and there is
a great green field
of maize
around him,
leaves sparkling
in the sun

he does not retreat
or yield—
undying,
he still lives

at the back
of my mind
he still speaks
to me

nothing is changed
or altered
all is permanent
and unyielding
he does not fall—

there is no death—
the great charro

untitled

through the night,
through the darkwood
of night
we move
in the coach
along a road
twisting
through the high mist
of Sierra Madre,
the only lights
are the vast
flattened-out stars
and our headlights
bouncing
like a child's toy

we are lost somewhere
between ocean
and desert,
somewhere
between the dreaming
of dreams
and the sharp spine
of the cactus,
somewhere
in the floating step
between today and tomorrow

suddenly
thunder cracks
and the world
comes alive with light

the bus tops a rise,
lurching at a dizzy speed,
and towers
and banners
of magnificent gleaming,
a sun-glow
of diamonds,
spring before us—
for one strange
unbroken moment
borrowed from
the silence
of time—
the kingdom
of Montezuma
gleams
before our eyes

untitled

when I think of you
I think of a flower
just opened
at the touch
of morning's light
on an ancient stone wall
somewhere
in the south
of Mexico

children play
in the road nearby,
a woman sweeps
her steps
with a broom
made of lemon leaves,
a shy, dark-eyed girl
runs crooked home
with a bagful
of frosted cakes—
and in the distance
a mountain stands
hazy and blue

and I think of you
the flower
with day's light
gathering about you,
and the sweetness
of nectar
nestled
deep inside you—

and your rays
bright as butterfly wing
as at other moments
I need you—
but especially now
in the morning—
you and the children
and the blue mountain
speak life to me

Zapata

deep inside
my father wept—
like strange
slow pearls
tears rimmed his eyes,
and in the room
there was no sound;
only,
in the distance,
tall shadows
of horsemen
broke across
the moonlit earth

and there sprang
into my father's eyes
the licking of flames
through the hungry night

and I saw
a village burning, burning
and I heard the cries
of women
and of children
running, running
into the blade-stroke
of the cold machete

yes,
I remember the night
I watched my father cry

Zapatista woman

there was something
deep in me,
something I felt

it was like the maize
green-leaved in the sun,
it was like the earth
in which the maize
found root—
the dark rich loam
of the morning
of the world

it was my anger
at the fences,
at the thirst
in my soul,
at the face-drawn hunger
in the bellies
of my children

for all of this I died—
for all of this
I carried dynamite
against the warmth
of my heart

it was
for bread and earth.
and justice—
it was for him

*Zapotec village**

twilight

slow and lavender
the moon moves
over the river

silver as
the underside of leaf
fish leap
from great dark pools

the Zapotec girl
on the craggy overhang
is a slim ghost-like presence—

she is at one
with darkness
and moon—

at one
with water
and rock—

a horse neighs
in the distance

the mango tree
is still as stone

night swallows all

**See "Indian village," p. 22.*

*Zapotec Woman**

still
I see you, mother,
sitting
little and hunched
and brown
in the cramped
doorway
of the cramped
doorway
of the cathedral—
your hand
extended
toward us—

inside
there is gold,
and diamond
embedded
in the gold

outside
there is warmth
of sun
and the blossoming
of yellow flowers
and the many
colors
in the laughter
of the children

Nature

untitled

after sudden rain,
the goddess of spring
descending,
the air alive
with green translucence
the iris
lean together
yellow and blue
and gold
sparkling
with diamond rain

they whisper
in April mist;
they tumble
through memories
of blossoming—
they have brought
to earth
a special, lovely
kind of light

the light
I see glowing
in your eyes,
in your heart
when you step out,
with love,
to apprehend
this world

untitled

after years
I still miss
the high green call
of the crow
from the sky-green
of the long-leaf pine

all else
is morning still
except for
the light clicking
of blades
as winds stirs
through the clean
sharp waiting
of palmettos

and now
the crow
sweeps green down
across the dream
by which my heart sees
and the day begins
both there and here

Alert

Out where the wind blows
Like rough willowy seas
And grasses tick dryly
At the end of the year,
Out where the sky
Is scudded with cloud
And the chill of dark shadows
Clings to the trees,
Out where the earth
Breathes the fragrance of time
And shriveled long pods
Rattle to life,
I walk in the noon
Alert to my sorrow
And think of the
plainness of joy,
And I think of the
plainness of joy.

Autumn Has Come Early

Wind shakes in the trees,
Shivers along the ground:
Leaves pale yellow
Float from elm and poplar,
Ailanthus flames
Amid rustled
Green of bracken,
Milkweed pod
Splits dryly.

Sun moves hazily and
Down the sky,
Peering through dust
Wind-whorled
From open fields
Like subtle, sterile pollen.
Shadows lengthen into evening,
Harden into night,
Till air tapers
Into chill
As sharp as icicle.

untitled

back of these trees,
oak and sumac,
under the russet
ranging winds
of the autumn,
the clear blue skies
of the spring,
in this green clutter
of house,
lived a woman
whose life
was a constant surprise—

roses surprised her,
climbing across
the blue trellis
of June

the sea wave
surprised her,
breaking into rainbow
on the light
of the beach

the monarch
surprised her,
perched orange
on the orange
of the butterfly weed

and today
I still dwell
in the world
of her wonder—
here
in this green clutter
of house

Birth

Blue-gold horseflies
Hang to the darkening
Summer screen door:
Wind in gusty semicircles
Plays paper
Along the brushed alleyway:
Puddles from the rain
Of yesterday
Shudder
Like a sun left over:

Amid the green
Of ailanthus
Blossom
Strange stories
Of the coming scatterwork
Of showers:
Sun runs a last soothing hand
Across the shoulders
Of earth,
Springs back and out of sight:
And clouds
Like impatient lovers
Curve deeper together:

Rain comes now
Separately, blue-gold
Into the open alley:
Houses draw their roofs tighter
And give themselves
To long forgotten dream.

Bright Dread

In the gold cool sun
Of autumn
Leaves maple sycamore
Poplar float
Slow on drift of wind
Finally to corners
Where rain will touch
Them dark:

Only in the drying
Rustle of late spring
May children's feet
Raise them again
To a moment's life
Of sound:

They seem now
Like yellow curious
Barques
Adrift
On blue currents
Of air
No port
Has ever known.

They read loneliness
Into the eye
Bright dread
Into the heart
No melancholy
Knowing them
As deep
As deliberate autumn.

childish

in a rush
of belated winter wind
curving from skies
and thin white rooftops,
snows came,
bespoke the opening
lilac bud,
gave curt how-do
to forsythia petals,
piled down upon
the daffodil—
and stayed:

rude, it was;
such a guest
not known
in these proper
parts
for sundry ages:
we used every argument,
thinking ourselves,
as human,
in the right,
and bade him go

but he only smiled
and played at hopscotch
through the alleys;
defied us
in the open
and would not go

Cold Snap

The day leapt cold
And the sun like an icy eye
Peered at us mockingly
Amid the green growth of summer.
Water edged with thinnest crystal
Trembled in puddles
Of the wind-bent fields,
And the bare feet of children
Had given way to curious sneakers.

They played in a world so strange
It might be broken
By a step too springing,
By a leap too long and glad—
Shattered as waking
Shatters into troubling pieces
A dream too exceptional to last.

But the day warmed finally,
And blood began to sing at the wrists,
Blossoming took hold, once again, of the flower,
And bare feet played like birds
Rollicking in dust.

the coming of winter to north Florida

high in the frosty night
above the smoke
of blue-shadowed chimneys
needles
of the long-leaf pine
whet and sharpen
the air

in the woodpile
beside the empty
rain barrel
an ax stands
handle high,
angling
from the gleam
of heartwood

the house,
tipped
across low pillars
of cement block,
sways
upon a wave
of gathered winter wind,
creaks helplessly
along its stretching
wooden floor,
then anchors down
to cold

inside,
in the warm
pinewood firelight,
we listen
for the dazzling fall
of cones—
and wait
for violets
of the spring
to come

Dwarf Dandelion

(distance of spring)

samaras spin gently,
gently spin,
turning down
sun-bright
currents
of the air—

blossoms
of the redbud,
sparks
of chill spring fire,
glow across
the hearth
of April morning—

at the eastern gate
you stand
alone,
alone renewed,
where flakes of snow,
the last,
turn dazzling
into blossoms
of the blackberry
poised against
the newly risen sun

finding the way

in smoke-risen
leaves,
in the lush damp
feel of morning,
in the high sycamore
floating yellow leaves
down,
in the wind-brushed coat
of the ground squirrel,
in the lingering fragrance
of the marigold blossoming,
in the orange haze
of moon
rising over the darkness
of silo,
in the smooth arrow
of movement
that the muskrat makes
through the stillness
of blue-green water,
in the eaves
dripping dusk
in the back lots
of dream,
I find my way
down the misty reach
of September
into the world
of tomorrow

firebird

let dusk drift in
slow and blue
and almost liquid
and let there be
a little Oriental temple
made of leaves
and flowers
of the sumac
poised breathless
in the air—

and let there be
a last light
from the setting
of the sun
to tip the highest branches
with the glowing
of a pure and ancient gold—

and finally
let there be within
you the summer princess
poised in meditation,
a speaking silence
on your lips,
entrancement in your eyes
as you watch
a slow and summer moon
rise from its perch
like a luminous firebird
out of the mysteries
of long-ago
rice paper
tales

Florida's first snow

wind rose cold blue
in the morning;
we went for the milk
pail swinging

our feet pure frost
and our lips just numb
we scuffed at the air
to keep ourselves warm

and on our return
with milk turning white
in the cold,
we passed through clouds
of palmetto, we
noticed the trembling
of cane

and now
like papier-mâché
the sky began to fall:
it broke to pieces
in our eye
and fell to our feet
like bits
of old light

for Eudora Welty

your eyes
unmitigated tenderness

petals after rain

the pure shone self
of the live oak

the wings of the mayfly
translucent with light
of summer's moon

a chameleon drowsing
gold-white
on the heartwood
of pine

the bright hand
of the sun
caressing the blossom
of pear

your eyes
unmitigated tenderness

for Jean Kay

(in memoriam)

wind has fallen
from the trees,
a stillness
gathers close;
clouds drift overhead
in clearest blue,
and a swallow
wings its silent way

I see you here,
your bending figure
here, your smile here,
your singing spirit here

a trowel in one hand,
a seedling in the other,
big April in your heart,
you turn the earth
to richness,
you turn the sun
to brightness
of the marigold

you are loved
who nurtures
timeless beauty

gold rays of beauty

for you
these flowers

forsythia,
jonquil, daffodil,
crocus

the yellows,
the golds,
the ambers
of the sun

the warmth,
the closeness,
the nestling body
of the earth

risen,
blossomed
to this petalled,
gold-rayed
beauty

this April
for you

untitled

the hawk
is a loner
high in the blue
of the morning sky

the wind
carries him
even higher,
turning, turning

and now he falls,
wings spread,
gliding down,
gliding down
taking the whole sky
with him,
skimming the green earth—
flower and fox
and fern—

a swift dark shadow
across the green—

he turns a corner
I cannot see
and I lose him
in the swirling morning wind

hidden

(Bouncing Bet)

away from us,
hidden from us,
the red fox prowls

the night is his,
the stars are his,
the mint-broken earth
is his,
the call of cicada,
of cricket, of frog—
all his

he makes track
our hearts
can only dream of:
the smell
of crushed summer grass,
the sharp
quick cool
of a leaf-damp hollow,
the sudden
liquid gold eyes
of an owl
lighting down
at him,
the scurry
of the ground squirrel

away from us,
hidden from us,
the red fox prowls

I Have Heard Birds

I have heard birds
singing at dawn
insisting that life
is beautiful; singing
with spirits rising
higher than song
in the shining air.

How can a bird echo
a tune my life plays,
or lilt of spirit
not changing
in night or storm?

Birds are not thankful,
they cannot love
or remember joy;
they know only one way
of life—nesting
And song and flight.

Yet, I have heard birds
singing at dawn,
and insisting that life
is beautiful.

untitled

I offer you
this leaf:
it is brimful
of the green of sun,
it is edged
with eternities
of summer,
it is veined
with the thought
of God

It is vivid,
as bright
as you

untitled

I watch these willows
Grow, and come
To April height,
Along the shore
Of this quick
Vernal pond:

The snow is gone,
And ice,
Melted to the roots
Of rose and mallow:

Pale shoots of grass,
Wayward green,
Shoulder slow
And mighty way
Through shells
Of ancient leaf:

Spring sun
Floats dim gold
Across the sky,
Shadows fall away:

A warmth encloses me,
A brief
And sun-shone
Willowed world,
And I am new again,
A winter past,
To take a turn again,
Due south,
At April's corner.

Highbush Cranberry

In spring the ailanthus trees
Unfurled along the alley fences
Like precious ferns
Out of an Orient of dream
To cast a spell on us.

By summer, we were warrior bold enough
To pull the curved plume
From the stubborn stem
And with a slick green hand
Strip it of its leaflets—
To hold at last a sword
With Chinese daring.

Autumn exploded bright fruit
Among the lone survivors of our warfare,
Like rockets going off
In curious silence
Down the long October alley.
We could not dig to China,
But it had grown through to us.

A Land of the Sea

Lingering in the fields,
In the high grass fields
Where the wind sweeps
And the grasses swell and die,
Here lingering I stand,
And watch the sail of birds
Sundering the sky
Into leapward fragments
Of light.
The cut-blades of grass
Swim in the air,
Sharp as fins,
And the rocks massive in the undergrowth
Jut like islands
On the washing green.
Over the wide field a murmur grows,
Resonant in the curve of each blade
As in a sounding shell,
And outward, suddenly,
Upward,
In a gathering rush of wind,
Torn from the bending grass,
A roar ascends
As of a wild surf
Pounding on a wild shore.

Mowing

It is not so much the flowers
I will miss—each a yellow flare
Of petals around a dark coal—
Nor the grass with high green stance
Holding dew all day where one sheath
Joins another. Not exactly these.
The tractor with the sharp-honed
Blades of its mower felling grass
And flower goes about its work
With exhaustive, noisy patience,
Leaving litter of yellow and green
In a puzzle of the earth, while I
Think of children who shall no longer
Play all an afternoon away
Just outside my window, their mops
Of heads moving through the field
Each in the bobbing center
Of the bright adventure of laughter.

untitled

My knowing is in
The leaf itself,
My eye there
Drinking
Thirsty greens
From air's light edge
To center's dark gold sun.

My ear there—
And my skin there—
To know how wind
Sings the surface
Or catches
For a whispered moment
The burred
Underside
Of leaf.

My heart there—
To know the slow
Gold coming of autumn,
The lonely hitch of yellows
And final
Black breaking
Of petiole.

I myself there
With nowhere else
To be—
To be.

Naming It

The wind catches
High in the night tree,
Trembling there,
Rocking there,
Spinning off in last dark leaves
Of the year,
Dropping them silently
Around us
As we stand
At the foot of November:
We say nothing,
Only listen to the small
Disaster of wind:
I searched for reasons
We must go,
Leave each to each
In worlds as unsummered
As now:
My mind delves,
Comes up for breath:
What does the wind know?
The last leaf
At our feet?
I only give a name to autumn,
Thinking it therefore is,
As I give a name to this,
Our parting,
Making it so, without reason,
With a word.
You turn silently away.

untitled

on this duneside
of earth
where sun and shadow play
in the quicksilver green
of poplar and oak,
we sit and talk,
we weigh moments
of blossom and cloud,
we drift
with ancient tides
of sand,
we will ourselves
a part
of evergoing,
moon-changed nature:

we are never still
nor are the hearts
within us,
nor is the soul
more than any
changing
single thing

untitled

Only the crow
Knows
What nothingness is

He sits
In the tree
And jeers

He is rough
And uncomely
And dark

He sings
With a joke
In his throat

The Queen of Being Young

Spring came to the tenement:
Sun little by little soaked
Into the winter brick,
In the fenced backyard
Green growth began kicking aside
Old pieces of mortar
And squinting around boards,
Children took their shoes
Off pale edgy feet
And before the weather
Had finally chased the wooden chill
From the labyrinth of back porches,
Played on banisters and rails
With the delight of monkeys,
With the slyness of youth
So completely released
From winter dreams at last
Spring could not have come
More spryly or green
To any lonely country.

Rain Dream

(for A.S.)

The magnolia stands
In slow cool wind
Of April's afterrain,
The light
Of a shy and broken sun
Gleaming
Deep white
In the blossoms:

Children
With wariness
Of new world explorers
Venture
From the doorways
Of their dreams
To catch up
In glad green hands
A few petals
Of the silver sky
Made just a tint of lavender
By the quick and mystic
Prisming
Of clouds.

The River

1895

the river
brimming summer
over the pool
of the clean swift trout;
alders leaning
to the sky of water
with green clear lines;
echoing splash
of the silver body
of God's fish
curving through dawn
for the subtle green
of the mayfly

1975

but now
phalluses of pipe
dripping
pickling fluid
from man's
ghost body;
the darkness
of Styx
as horseweed
rubs at the wind
and steam rises
like a last breath
to mark
this grave forgotten yard

Sky Has Settled in for Winter

The balsam stands
Silent and snow-boughed,
Heavy with cold in the northland,
Leaves of elm and oak
Curl darkly in their buds,
Butterflies in dim cocoons.
And the sparrow,
That gray unsouthern bird,
Has dropped out of way of wind
Into the warmth of shrub.
All is a quiet waiting,
A slow still dreaming
As night turns steadily overhead—
Each star a miracle
Bound for the sun-spring,
The green and flower yellow of April—
And any man, in whatever winter desert,
With faith howsoever made,
Becomes a king,
A bold pursuer of the stars.

Sneezeweed

autumn gathers
its orange moons,
its circling blue skies,
the low startled flight
of the red-winged blackbird

grasses tick together
in long, long fields,
lone jack pines
pull their branches in
like a fox
curling to its sleep,
cold sifts down
through the mountainous
hay mow,
and the tiny skittering
of barn mice
stops

I dream now
in the grasses
as I walk—
and in silver-blue
explosion,
in a scattering
of old blossom and seed,
the pheasant
rises magnificent
before me

untitled

snows came
in a rage of white,
winds slid north
from the vast, bleak lake,
battering at windows,
exploding at chimney tops,
as if Chicago were still
a few houses
and a narrow onion-withered
river;
branches shook
and oak leaves
wiry from autumn
tore finally free
and curving
over the curve of snow
dropped darkly
down away

drifts piled high
and blue
and spun
to gargoyle shapes
at the corner
of the eye,
and at the breathing
edges of the doors
spirits tapped and tapped,
pleading, pleading

spring at Mount Vernon

(slaves' cemetery at Mount Vernon)

here
the bodies
are tangled
root-deep
in the earth—
nameless

beside them
the violet blossoms,
petal-pure blue
as God's own sky—
and the wren
sings silver
toward the fullness
of summer

there are names
in the flowers—
names on the notes
of the birds

in the distance,
deep in the shadow
of hemlock,
glimmers
the cold marble
of unspeaking tombs

Telling

the gold-red sun
rises slow
behind winter trees,
flaming at
blackness of twig
and branch,
thrusting shadows
where no leaf springs:
these were sycamores once
full green
in summer's tide,
then like a crying
no one can hear
a deep and turning
yellow
in restive autumn's
cold: now
the memory and the patchwork
peel of bark,
a green that gives
smooth way
to sullen brown,
helps shape my thinking,
bends my heart
to shadows
cut from earth: if tree
has voice, has telling
of a history,
then it tells me once again
of you,
and turns me face to face
with loss

we spoke

(Canada Violet)

in the spring
in the green leap
that April makes
across fences
of the winter,

in the yellows
of forsythia sunrise
and the lavenders
of lilac full day,

under the high noon
of tulip's pure gold—
in such season
we met,
in the warmth
of such time
we spoke,
in the blossoming
of feelings like these
we astonished ourselves
into love

wet gold

rain hangs
on the coast
like heavy branches
of blue-green
trees

light lies
poised
on the leaves
like dim
wet patches
of gold

a silence
of bats
stains
the dark hollow
of a trunk

in a muffled
distance
of vine
a bird calls
like old
forgotten
dream

deep
in the shifting
green shadows
a seed
germinates
bold
as the signature
of the god
of the sun

whatever's dark

I like
whatever is dark,
whatever is darker

water is dark,
the rich brine
of the sea,
the immense
breathless calm
of the deep

the night
of the gleaming
field cricket
is dark
as he sings
in celebration
of the just
broken earth
of the harvest

the windings
and roadways
of space
are dark—
transits
to another universe,
a remarkable world
just beyond
our own

and darkest
of all
is beauty—
which is dreamt
and born
in the house
of the rose
long before
it opens itself
to the night

untitled

you are like
the silverines
of clear water
coursing
over clear stones
in a morning brook

you are the slow
gleaming arc
that Queen Anne's lace
traces upon the air
as it nods
upon early summer wind

you are
the moonlight
that brims
the deep blossom
of calla lily
in the far fields
of night
and beauty's mystery

You Are Like Moments

As when
Rose petal is held
In the gold locket
Of dawn.

As when
Hawk tilts
Its burnished wing
Into a turn
Of blue.

As when
The swift white
Of rabbit
Blossoms amazed
Amid more daisies
And more.

As when
A moon-washed wave—
Vanishing—
Leaves a crescent
Of diamonds
Across the sand.

You are like moments:
That time out of time
Always refusing the past—
That breathless word
Beyond mere word.

Young Beauty

It is almost instinct
That drives a child on a day late in spring
To bring in from outdoors a sampling apiece
Of the year's first wonders:
Leaves crumpled
By the hands that held them;
Dandelions picked into bunches
As large as a sunflower;
Blossoms of mock-orange
Brought in with superstitious reverence;
You place them in an old vase
Or in a row of paper cups,
And wonder whether it is love
That has brought them to you,
Of the sudden sense of discovery
About being alive
With which the child jumps forth
To capture all that, like himself,
Shows forth the young beauty of a season.

People

1931

on the windy bright streets
of my childhood
autumn blue afternoons
after school
my friend and I
searched old depression
gutters
for empty packs
of cigarettes—
camel, lucky strike

we'd peel off
the shiny inner foil
with breath-held ritual,
composition
of the effort
of the mouth,
then take our crumpled prize
to the little
gray-boarded house
where my grandmother lived
with giant balls of string
and globes of tinfoil
glimmering
like old used-up suns

her eyes
would lighten
to a soft, soft, blue
to see us
standing
with our tribute
but then
would falter dark
beyond the reach
of galaxies

how empty,
they seemed to say,
the pain of living
so alone,
so dim,
as endlessly as string

1935

when we were young,
when we were
no taller
than cornflowers,
each day seemed
to lie before us
like the sands
and the oceans
of the world—

we climbed
into mulberry trees
and stained our mouths
with red and black
and blue
as birds stared at us
offended,
and chattered angrily—
we dug holes
deeper than anyone
could ever imagine
but we never came upon
a rickshaw
or anyone to pull it

for long hours
we watched
ants and bees and butterflies
and tarantulas
and secretly
we wanted
to encounter a rattlesnake
but never did—

we sucked nectar
from the great
white flower
and felt like God Himself—

we disobeyed
our neighbors, our aunts,
our uncles, our teachers,
our parents,
our grandparents,
and the ice delivery man—

sometimes we wished
that someone would find us
and tell us
what to do
but nobody
ever came

Adopted

She sat with eyes tipped
Into memories,
A hand holding an orange
Like a girl in an impressionist painting,
Her words scattering
Through the room
Like birds seeking the freedom
Of the sky.

Did parents she had never known
Did the parents who had "taken her"
Did God
Did who, did what
Want her?

Yes, I am His child,
She said with a voice
Poised on a new thought,
Turmoil softened from her eyes,
And the last I saw of her
She was running open-armed
Out into the world.
A bird stooped down to her out of the sky
And flowers bent toward her
Petalling her lonely path.

Adult

Having lived too long
In the hospital room,
Having watched too long
Spring and summer kids
Abandon themselves to play
In the lot below her window,
Having quietly discovered
Subtler nuances
Than any of her visitors
Ever knew they betrayed,
The six-year-old went on holiday.
Afterwards, there was somber
Talk of God, angry
Talk of cancer, maudlin
Talk of little girls, frightened
Talk of death. It is not easy,
As she knew with that smile
And outstretched hand of hers,
To comfort an adult

untitled

after the bombing of Munich
the fires that grew into the wind
that grew into fires
still more windy and deadly
he gathered
the burnt, half crazy-eyed
children from streets
and charcoaled corners
of houses
and spirited them
up through fresh green pines
to a monastery
on a mountainside

here for a year, alone,
he cared for them, fed them
whatever, clothed them
however, tried his best,
slow and slowly,
scream by scream,
to put them together again,
to push the real brightness
of blue
back into their eyes

he watched them
and watched them die
and go under:

he just barely saved himself;
he wrote crosses
across the hills
and under the pines;
one whole
part of his life
is still lacking a tongue

at dusk he sits almost unmoved at his piano:
his hands play Mozart

Agricultural Program

Where the village was
Is still now.
Nothing but wind
Edges on
The stubble of grass,
The little flowers
Poked yellow and blue
Through wasted field:
I do not hear
The anger,
The brutal laughter
Of the people
Sitting beside
Good samovar
And the warmth
Of stove.
I do not hear
The singer
In the tavern
Telling
In a last lost
Moment of joy
His long, long
Loneliness, his
Tea and dark bread.
Before dark comes
I only remember the fire,
The bird-stutter
Of machine gun.

August Night

The El goes by again,
Rattling me,
The baby squalls:
Night is a huge fan
Blowing heat in at the window,
My glass sweats
To my hand.

O!
To tear down walls,
Walk out in a cloud of plaster dust
And be homeless somewhere,
But every nightfall
I climb the stairway
Smothering of bacon grease,
Looking for something—
Cool—in the eyes
Of my pretty wife.

She waits each evening
With love's docility,
And I—
My mind's a wanderer,
A rebel:
Always
I'm somewhere else
Than in her arms,
And she feels it
With woman's understanding.

I can drink another whiskey
To beat the heat:
Her patience scorches me.

Billie Holiday

With that gardenia in her hair
She bent everyday words
Into syllables blue and slow:
With her half-closed lids
Remembering, forgetting, puzzling—
Scrubbing, for a nickel,
White stoops in Baltimore;
Feeling in her throat
A swell of sadness
Like a caged blinking bird.

In her bone, in her blood, in her voice
Ran the sweet terror,
The sorrow-search for happiness,
That made men cry,
Shivered the spine
With release from the weight
Of dying.

Her voice, always climbing away from death,
Reached peaks
Where showers never came—
And now it is heard no more,
Like the silence
Of a blossom unfolding,
The silence
Of a wing lifting through the stepless air.

Childhood's Orient

In spring the ailanthus trees
Unfurled along the alley fences
Like precious ferns
Out of an Orient of dream
To cast a spell on us.

By summer, we were warrior bold enough
To pull the curved plume
From the stubborn stem
And with a slick green hand
Strip it of its leaflets—
To hold at last a sword
With Chinese daring.

Autumn exploded bright fruit
Among the lone survivors of our warfare,
Like rockets going off
In curious silence
Down the long October alley.
We could not dig to China,
But it had grown through to us.

Concentration

(For Mike Vukasinovic)

My son does not understand:
He unzips the cellophane
From a package of cigarettes
With all the carelessness
Of not knowing,
Plucks out the little white cylinder
With a flaunt,
And dangles it half lit from his lips.

In the camp, where cylinders of steel
Swung slowly over us,
A cigarette burning jaggedly
Drifted to us on wry currents of air
As if from corners
Of the dreaming left to us.

I traded a week's butter,
Half a week's bread
For three,
And each went round, in dark lips
And trembling hands,
With remorseless concentration
Of links in a chain.

My son, with tobacco stain
On his fingers, is lost to me
In a chain of his own:
"Have one, Dad, have one," he says
With a careless smile.
"Have one."
And I know he is simply trying
To make a friend of me. I know.

The Corner Place

Under the neon as jumpy
As a nerve,
The entrance darkly dissolves
Into the soothing embrace
Of a life perfectly known:
An old friend
To appreciate you as you,
To wink forgiveness
At all faults,
To permit dreaming
Of heroic proportions.
Later, lights go on with a bitter taste,
The barrage impersonally smothers away
The bloom of rings your glass has made,
Records of the night
Swing swiftly into an unmusical stack,
And you are left alone—
As jumpy as a child
Whose parents have left along
The pathways of nerve
Only the echoes of their disapproval.

The Daughter

My father, who loved from a distance,
My mother, who shrank from empty spaces,
Frightened me
With their separate rooms
Where nightlamps burned
Like stars eternally lost.

They flickered at me
As I stole out at evening,
Picking one for hate, one for love
(Not knowing which was which),
And sank Lethe-ward
Into wine-sweet sedation
Before the face of Any Man.
He swam at me smiling and hateful
Till I could not tell what I loathed, what loved.
In the strange room
With a mirror looking back at me
I finally could not tell who I was.

Stars in the early morning,
On my way back to where I had begun,
Looked down at me
From cold distance
And I plunged swiftly, swiftly
Back to that hidden tide-deep room
Where he had put my trembling arms around him
And asked with dismay,
"But why are you so frightened?"

Diagnosis: cp

I'm caught
in a body
that doesn't work

it turns on me,
it falters,
impulses go awry

I wonder if you know
What happens to me
When I reach for something:

power lines tangle
and electrons
miss their mark—
I become
a wild rampant
rollercoaster,
lost
on my own
disobedient tracks

but know
that I have a soul—
and you must
try to understand
my effort
to form a word
and must comprehend
that so simple a thing as a smile
is the work
of centuries

I too am history—
I can teach patience,
I can inspire faith,
I can introduce you
to the practice
of love

untitled

Diaz,
Huerta—
I've heard these names—
they are the enemy,
they are the foe

I don't understand everything—
the cursing,
the blood,
the bullets,
the singing,
cooking our meals
on the top
of the lumbering boxcar

but I do know
how corn leaves sound
when they brush together
in the wind,
I know the lonely call
of the field cricket
in the furrowed fields of night,
and I know the sound
of women weeping
in rooms
from which the men have gone

I'm eleven years old,
I'm the camp bugler,
no one will let me fight,
they squeeze their hand on my
shoulder
and say,
"Your time will come:
you wait!"

I have dreams at night—
I see my bugle
in the thundering sky

untitled

the dust was high that summer
it gritted in our oatmeal
like little sparks
and it rose in the sky
like tentative plumes of fern
gray in the far distance

it whistled in under windows
to leave strange
little ridges of dust
on the sills

our talk became muffled
and we mumble gray words

before we went outside
we covered the mouth and the nose
with a wet handkerchief
over the face

we felt like creatures
in somebody else's nightmare
and in the dim light
down the long night streets
cars looked like monsters
advancing upon us
with wide foreing eyes

we couldn't think
in all the dust
there were whispers
and we were gray ghosts of men,
women and children
wandering through a gray wall

at night we were afraid
and we went to sleep slow

tomorrow
we would see
the golden sun
rising to bring back day,
or would we?

we heard a slithering
of dust
at the windows
we were like bodies
deprived of soul

dogs had forgotten how to bark
and cats stared at us
with curious green deadly eyes

the encounter

i tried sitting
month after month
at the window
of my room
in an old people's home,
seeing only samaras
of the maple
drift casually past
as television
in the distant lounge
told stories of the winning
of sudden prizes

and i was even more lonely
than i had ever thought possible

finally i went back
to the little girl
and said, do you think
i am very, very old,
yes, she said,

how old do you think i am, i said
she said, about twenty, i guess
or maybe even twenty-three

all for nothing!

why do your hands shake
said the little girl,
and smiling i said
because i am an old, old
man, older than all skies,
all mountains, even the moon:
and she knew me and smiled

but i was lonely

for days afterwards
i was playing chess
in central park, years
between moves,
and sparrows
in perfect indifference
built a nest
in my hat

and i was very lonely

Emergency Room

Welts, cuts, bruises,
Cigarette burns, dozens:
I remember the textbooks
With copyright dates,
Prefaces, and abstract
Presentations
Of the subject—nice
Words, well organized
Into reassuring paragraphs—
Everything explained—
And Mike or Phil
Or John and I, the night
Before exams,
Would drink a couple
Beers,
Recite the names
Of muscles and all minute
Attachments—
Long long ago:
I cannot put my thoughts
In order:
What I see and see:
In dream, in fantasy,
Yes:
Even a ragdoll
From a dimestore
Would be not quite comprehensible:
But at least within some reach
Of mind:
Or do you
When you do it
Not know
Your child being burned
Methodically
With what delight:
Maybe I'm a ragdoll
Insufficient to feeling:
Maybe when you burn me
With your cigarette again again,
And strike me with your board again again,
I do not even scream.

Eighteen Years Old

His eyes sad,
As if peering puzzledly
In at the lostness
Of a soul he'd heard
Some rumors of,
His lips a mumble
Of words
Trying to sort
Themselves to understanding
But failing
Into a smile of self-contempt,
His bearing stoop-shouldered,
Pinching up his shadow
As he walks
Into a cold amorphous figure
On the earth:

We've at last considered
Parolling him from the ghetto,
Suddenly want to help,
Be kind,
To love—

Too late.

Emmett Kelly

On his way out
to dump his garbage
in the land of flowers
he collapsed

curious—
we'll never know
if he went
weeping—or
laughing—

maybe for a joke
that Willie knew about
someone just
swept him
out of the spotlight
with a huge, gentle broom

he's back
in the green room now—
resting
between acts

Facets of Indiana

(for John Carlisle)

and the fields are here
beneath the morning mist
and the fences
that run along
the soft dirt roads
and the crows are here,
waiting in the willows,
down by the dry streambed

and over here
are the abandoned corn cribs
and a well cover
and parts of a harrow
rusting,
and here
in the white—sweet-clover wind
are the voices—
the old whispered voices—
"mustard weed
and thistle
are taking my fields,"
"rain is washing me away,"
"my chicks are dying
in the egg"

and now, finally,
here is the twilight,
the pale blown stars
of late summer,
the lone field crickets
of graveled side roads,
the darkening windows
of a haunted
barren church

Fandancerie

a eulogy

42nd Street and Adams
died last night
in a scar-walled wallup
where lived
Felicia the Fan Dancer

Behind a plume
of past-tense peacocks
her curves of creamy lust
swelled and ebbed
beyond her unblinking neon eyes

And men
behind dark glasses
watched her planetary breasts
a-roll a-roll a-roll
beneath an infancy of face

She died alone
they said
and no one knew but me
of the piteous prayer she lived
behind the turquoise blue dream
of Felicia the Fan Dancer

In a trunk of dusty plumage
past the drooling eyes of men
hid a girl with wingless longing
for a life she couldn't name
in an ordinary way

For Felicia's god
rolled planets on his tongue
like plump purple grapes
and spat the bitter seeds
at the honky-tonks of earth
as she stood watch...
in cool blue fandancerie

42nd Street and Adams
died last night
in a scar-walled walkup
with Felicia the Fan Dancer.

The Farthest West You Can Go is East

On John Hersey's War Comment in Newspaper Column—1946

This holy place
this hearthside
this inner citadel
of all we love
you invade at your risk

these icons
you do not defile
these sacred signs
of our own flesh and blood
you keep your foreign hands
off

heathen savages
imps from hell
like those buck-toothed
Japanese
the cartoons showed
in the forties

I remember the column
where Hersey described
the lonely corpse
of a brave young soldier
lying on a Pacific beach
treasured contents
of his wallet
all scattered
pictures of sweetheart
of mother and father
of sisters and brothers
souvenirs
of deepest frivolities

all that innocence wasted
an American kid
so far from home

but my eyes grew wider
at the end of the article

the dead soldier
was Japanese

thousands of miles
from his Japanese home
his holy loved ones
Japanese
his roots of reality
Japanese
his tears and laughter
Japanese

Field of Concentration

Her gaze
Is vague, almost
Colorless; she talks
Almost in whisper,
As if she would
Hurt nobody; her skin
Is drawn tight and pale
Over the frame
Of her body,
Except for blood-dead
Purple patches
Which her clothing,
In spite of her,
Sometimes cannot hide.
She is shy
As a high-strung animal,
Always jittering away.
In her themes,
In precise, cold prose,
Brilliant in imagery,
She describes her father:
Bearish with drink,
Grunting a kind
Of nightmarish language,
Clawing at all happiness,
He roams the rooms
Of the house
Until the smaller children squeal.
Then, the life
Nearly shaken out
Of his victim,
He crumples to the floor,
Where she, with horrible pity,
Tries to comfort him.
I myself am her professor.
For what it is worth,
I can give her an A.

What will an A
Mean to her?

For Aldegunda

evening has come
to rest softly
as bees—gold blossoms
along the branches
of the blue eucalyptus

there is a stillness
in the air,
a delicate holding
of the light
as quiet
as the syllables
of prayer

a child
dressed in the pastels
of Oaxaca
pauses at the newly
turned earth
of your grave

in a ritual
known only to memory
she observes
the delicate blossoms
of blue mist
that summer
has brought
to the earth

we watch her,
then she turns
and through
a long, long distance
of time
she smiles at us

for Ana

somehow you never grew
but in your fifties
you still wore
the clothing
and the manner
of a little girl—
patent-leather shoes
and a sundress
and a big bow
for your hair

for hours
you would sit unmoving,
your eyes
still and dark and deep
like shadowed pools
of a summer's
slow river
huddled
to an overhanging woods

your name was Ana
and you seldom spoke
and you would sit
with your hands folded
in your proper lap
as moonlight
from an open window
gathered close about you
and made you
into a princess
of once upon
a faery time

sometimes
we walked with you
among the glowing
distant stars

for Angela Jackson

with unwavering eye
and a sympathetic heart
you look deep
into human nature—
you know its failures
and its triumphs

you understand
that life is no accident,
that it has a central
crucial principle,
that its purpose
and its worth
are profound

most of all
you understand
that each life has its own unique
architectonic
and that this
architectonic
must be developed
in the face
of immense difficulties

without effort,
without absolute devotion,
life can never be accomplished

each successful life is a tribute
to the faith
that the human being,
can transmute herself,
against odds,
into a truly creative
independent individual

for the children

(in memory of Michael and Alexander)

this is trust

this is innocence

this is a cry for help
from the silence
of water

this is a question
deeper
than any generation

this is the wilting
of two broken violets,
the floating
of petals
of unspeaking waters,
the mystery
of the sparrow
when he signs no more

this is the slow
turning of the children
toward the splendor
of God

this is the eternal heart
of spring—
alive with swings
and the merry-go-round
and a caring
popcorn vendor

this is luminous
warm country
where children play
forevermore

for Dusty Rhodes

(for his work with handicapped children)

to the arm
that stutters away
from where he wants
to put it,
to the leg
that will not move
out of her most deeply
willed desire,
to the tongue
that never can
be true
to his simplest word,
to the thought that slips
away from her
somewhere
between one synapse
and another—

to all of these,
your heart is
magnificently
attuned,
your mind is
deepest caring,
your soul is
clear transcending word

for Gwendolyn Brooks

I like the bitter
Sweet courage
Of this woman,
The naked eye,
The mind unfooled.
From the old couple
Lonely and out of touch
Except with deep humanity
Of being themselves
To the mirage of pride
Boisterously
Insisting on its rights
In the desert of its life,
She etches man
With sharpest honesty,
Her painful heart
Too proud to tell.

For Jean Besozzi

I ask
and the earth
quietly does not reply
but only gives me
a vernal pond
haloed
with the brightness
of birdsong
and waking willow leaf

I ask
and the earth
quietly does not reply
but only gives me
the rose
of deep rose mallow
where the summer bee
stirs its wings
to pollen gold

I ask
and the earth
quietly does not reply
but only gives me
the sun-gold
of autumn's
sugar maple leaf

and yet I feel you
still beside me,
your gaze upon
each beauty
of this earth,
your voice
a whisper of delight

for Jean Shepherd

we played in the breezeways
between the houses
and wrestled
through the green
of crooked vacant lots

we explored the springtime
of lilac and forsythia
and thorny first rose,
we exulted
in the openness
of fine-gold August sun

we spun tops
along the curbs
of cold October streets
and spent pennies
on bubble-gum cards
that showed us
war
was only a thought or two
away

and from our dreams
we watched cat-crackers
flaming
in the troubled sky

For John Tuckey

you knew the currents
the shallows and deeps,
the sandbars and islands;
Of the broad
swift river
you moved mind's quick knowing,
with soul's understanding

in the leafwork
of alder and willow
you heard the green
rustle of time
you felt
the beauty of days,
the beauty
of clear
high-starred nights

but more than all else,
you practiced
with Huck
a vision
for the reaches
of time,
the dream
of the ultimate
oneness of man,
the finding
of freedom
in currents
of ongoing love

For Joseph Tinkham

for you
justice was more,
than word,
more than an idea,
it was an act,
it was courage
that rode on the wings
of the sun

it spoke
for inalienable freedom,
it spoke for the basic
heart-right
the essential spirit-right
of the individual,
for an light
whose effect
was to scatter
the shadows of tyranny

for you
justice
was the very body
of soul,
the motion
of its transcendence
toward God,
the brightness
that combines man
with his everlasting
enduring Creator

For Karyn Bohan

(in memoriam)

it is harder to believe
than not to believe:

and she worked at it
and knew it
and believed in the beauty
of him,
Lord Giver:

Who gave her
patience
and good cheer,
a clarity of vision,
a laughter
like
rain and roses,
a brightness
like butterflies
lifting
toward the summer sun

she was of that buoyant
loving spirit
that can never leave
the heart

because she believed
in the beauty
of Him

(Karyn was one of my favorite
students at Purdue Calumet)

For Ken Shipley

your eye
was an eye
for the quiet of beauty
of life-
for the profound
difference of things:

for the sun-shone
petals of rose
blossoming
to the warmth
of the summer

for the heifer
just born
struggling to cling
to the tilt
of the green, green earth

for the stars
as the swing
like pendulums
of light
from the waking hand
of God

and now
you dwell
in unchanging beauty
with Him

for Laura

your voice
is like
the faint green
whispering
of April's wind-

your smile
is a gathering
of lights-
from sunrise
in the blossomed morning
to the pure gold
of noon,
to the glimmer
of fireflies
in a blue
summer's dusk-

in your eyes
I sense the wisdom
of your way-
in your eyes
I read the echo
of your giving heart

For London Thigpen, Edwin Thigpen, Jaqueline Sharp, Ossie Britton, and Linda Britton

(in memoriam)

five are gone

on a day
late in spring,
the wind gathering
through the high green
of poplars,
they went looking
for frogs and tadpoles

leaving their shoes
by the poolside,
they went pig-tailed
and laughing
with a merriment
only children can know-
with a care and a love
only children can guess

now five are gone

but in the dusk
that falls slow,
across neighborhoods
that gather toward dark,
we can still hear them laugh,
and beyond, beyond
is a growing, pure light,
is a splendor
of summer forever

for Louis Armstrong

they laid him
in a box
and put his horn
on his chest

the box was made
of sturdy pine,
the horn was made
of long curved
syllables of breath,
of blues
on a full-mooned night

I have come out here
to look up
at the towering
long-leaf pines-
to listen to the wind
as it sings
through green palmettos,
to dig my fingers
into rich
warm earth

here there is sky
and pine and earth,
a bluesy mix,
a horn and piano
and a bass man
jamming long,
exploring long
the nature
of an endless time

who can match
the smile of the world?

For Margie Palm

at first
I was a teacher
and you were my student,
but soon
in your gentle
caring voice
you spoke
and wrote a poetry
such as I
had seldom heard

you taught me
how stars gather
high in the Southern sky
to illuminate
the lives
of wondering children.

you taught me
the need for compassion-
the delicate art
of matching
heart to heart,
spirit to spirit
so they
can never be
torn asunder

you taught me
that the spirit can live
forever
in a field of flowers
under the caring
eye of God-

you led me toward light
and I was your willing
fortunate student

For Martin Buber

Sorrow goes deep
As briers grow from very earth,
Tangling roots in soil
Till their ends
Are thin capillaries-
Invisibly one
With the substance
That nourished them.

Out of flesh
Springs the strange incapacity
To clear the mind
Of doubt,
Earth that keeps reminding us
Of limits
That sense of prison
Never mentioned,
Always there,
Mocking
Our Lilliputian pride.

So slave we are
We fear even him
Who would try to unlock us,
To send us out
To the freedom of love.
The urgency to take ourselves
Apart
In a world of thou–
The bearded philosopher
Selling his tolerant compassion.

For Martin Luther King

I don't know why
I was so struck:
About to fetch
The water from the well,
I notice a fellow
Driving along
In his wagon,
Behind two steady mules:
He holds the reigns loosely,
And on his face a curious smile,
As if you put two things
Into a bowl,
Sadness and courage,
And mixing them,
A happiness springs out.
He was singing a song
That came from him
As if it had never been sung before,
As if he loved the world,
The grass and dusty road,
The sound of the cricket
And the song of bird,
Man and woman, rich and poor,
Everything that peoples earth.
Last I saw of him
Was at setting sun,
Then darkness growing,
He faded from my sight:
But still, still
At every fall of night
I hear his joy of song.

For Martin Luther King

you went down
in an insanity
of violence

through a chaos
of broken promises
you fell
across the State
you matched faith
against the hard muscle
and the spittle
of charging dogs

with words
you turned away
the silver blades
of water hoses

and you taught us
how to pray
for the humanity
of everlasting
Sunday Schools

and still our hands are joined,
and still we sing
and still we move about you
in unbroken
rings
of faith

you are the alchemist
who turned pain
to loving art

For Mother Teresa

she was born
in a field of wheat
just before the end
of another harvest moon

she woke to
songs of the sparrows,
to the silver chirping
of crickets,
to the whisper
of great gold stalks
of wheat
standing tall
in the gardens of the Lord

she devoted her life
to the making of bread
which she gave freely,
gave happily
to the souls
of those in need

and her name was
Mother Teresa,
and her name
has become
another way
of saying love

for Mrs. Chambers

your gladness
glowed
with the green-gold light
of early spring-
a wide-eyed gaze
of wonder,
a warmth
of light young laughter,
a brightness
of curiosity
shining, shining

and you took us,
led us.
through this green time,
this April
of our lives,
and your words
were like a myriad blossoming,
a flowering
for all days

for Muhammad Ali

you are a man
beyond men-
you stand
for might,
for true power

what distances
you have traveled!
what joys
you have known!
what mornings
of despair
what longing!

but now you fight
a second way
an even nobler
more magnificent way-
for now the foe
is unseen
stealthier,
quietly malicious
mocking

there will be no rest
between rounds,
few seconds
to wipe your brow,
no referee
to call the punches-

and now
in this corner,
from the Bluegrass country
of the Louisville slugger,
from distances
no suffering can measure,
wearing a smile
that never wavers,
a courage that gives no quarter-

for my brother

I watch you
Write a poem,
Your head bent,
Dark hair over your eyes,
Your tongue busily
Searching your lips
For a word:

All of you
Turns to the pale
Of tight knuckles,
Your hand is a fist
Fighting its way:

Something is in
The room with us,
A musing ghostly thing
To which you bend
Your ear
And sing your spirit
Unafraid:

With eyes triumphant
You present
The poem to me,
The flowing lines
Of a four-year-old
With long
white
spaces
of silence
between.

for my grandmother

you taught me
to see, to comprehend
the beauty
of the violet-
the luminous
sky-blue
of its petals,
their fragile netting
of the clarity
and warmth
of sun

the green stroke
and motion
of the stem
lifting the blossom
skyward
to the eye of God!
it is a bell
of color
in the changing
summer wind

it is a covenant
and a promise
of the sanctity
of human life-
it is the 'yes'
to all questions
about the meaning
and the worth
of existence;
it is the chief
stem and blossom
of the soul

for my grandmother

the water
level silver
in the rain barrel
beside your house
gleamed at me
lie an upside-down
April sky-

its clarity
cut across the edge
of my eye-

I saw worlds there,
especially yours
preserved
in kind
of everlasting crystal;

a cardinal
perching
in a yellowwood tree

violets
nesting
in long-leaved grass

Bamboo hazing
The sky
With green

a world gone now
but never empty-
always gleaming
in my heart
with the clarity
of rainwater,
with reflections
of your love

for my grandmother

here
I will tell you
it is better to go in
indirectly,
to slide in
subtly
rather than go in
brazenly
with a bold announcement

we could begin
with a vivid
yellow and black
garden spider
poised
in its wet
morning web

or with the bamboo bush
towering green
over my child eyes-
broken
at the top
into green feathers
of light

or we could move
to her roses
pink and yellow
and white
with the extravagant
blossoming of summer

and the quietly,
riding on the sound
of whisper,
we could go in
and find her
sitting in a window
full of sun,
a smile in her eyes
as light and lifting
as any dream
of morning

for Ollie Sheehan

she ambushed me
once or twice:
from around a corner
she would come
with a handful of ideas
astonishing as flowers
picked in different seasons:

she would smile
at me then, challenge
a reply,
look bewildered
at my own bewilderment,
and wonder
at my silence:

she spoke
with love
and her silences
were love;
and her anger
never meant indifference:
it was a fine speaking
mounted on a fine passion
never to admit
the word or act
of surrender

For Pat

(who best understands this)

Life is response:
To take it in
With feeling, with love,
That which is:
And thus man is:
A dandelion can create him
If he let it,
Wants it,
Can be
With it
Fully: hollow light green
Of stem
As living as sun,
Frail sturdy course
Of it standing:
Rising from leaves
Of layered dark lace
As subtle as thoughts
Of a dream
Expressed
In ingots of gold
Crude from the furnace
Of sky:
Each petal
Of myriads
A narrow blunt yellow
Coaxing the eye
To the sun:
And then, in gusts,
The letting go,
A parachuting of worlds
Along currents
Of wind
Defying the earth
For a white golden while.

Charlie

For Pushkin

("Some say John was a Christian, some say John was a Jew, say John was a natural man")

the fervor to live
makes its way
from the courage
of self

of the two creations
the first is simply
biological
painful, yes,
traumatic
a leap
into the tings
of this world

the second creation,
re-creation,
must be of your own doing-
it is learning
to be
in this world
it is a synthesis
a putting together
of diverse elements
in order to accomplish
a completeness
it is a mission
and it is mystical

it is a gathering in
of all elements
of macrocosm,
shaping them
into the human
it is accommodation

it is unreserved
unselfish
acceptance

it is yes

For Roger Geimer

you have walked
with kings and clowns,
you have overheard
seditions
and attended masquerades

you have watched warfare
in the heavens
and tended
to the wounds
of grape-shot
here on teeming earth-

you've been fanciful
as Puck,
thoughtful and human
as Lear on the heath
and witty as Falstaff
at a round
of dry sack

you have made
a pilgrimage
of you own-
into the hearts
of myriad students
who like to ride
the lanes
and winding roads
of Olde England

For Ryan White

you were only thirteen,
a boy given to bicycles
and sodas,
when it came upon you

it was ugly,
it was very unpleasant,
it was an infection in us,
that you helped to cure

far worse than virus,
far worse than broken cells,
it was prehistoric
unreasoning dread,
it was intolerance

with a courage
born of compassion,
you spoke to our hearts
and you made our blood pure, Ryan,
and you made our blood whole

for Sigrid Stark

(a biography in images)

snows of Minnesota
glowing whiter
through December dusk
than the birch
of Indian canoe

icicles
gleaming
silver blue
along the edge
of April

gentle
the fall
of afterrain
like the rhapsody
of Grieg's piano
somewhere
in a summer woods

rose and fire-red
of maple
blazing
through Wisconsin fall

iridescent
cypress skies
imagined
at the heart-felt tip
of Van Gogh's brush

deep surging
of the sea-
silver as the leap
of fish-
up from the dark
Norwegian fjord

For Studs Terkel

you are a brave man
you are a bold man
you are a kind man

you do not judge
you let the people speak
you are true democracy

riches for you are nothing
wisdom is everything
and you find it everywhere

for you
the heart of man
is sacred
it is a temple
in which man is magnified
to his true worth

out the mouth
of the steelworker,
the busboy,
the grocer,
the migrant worker,
the blues singer,
the bricklayer,
the construction worker
come the words
that tell us most truly
what America is

you are just a man
you are a wise man

for Sue Romesburgh

(in memoriam)

you were as you were:
humorous, direct,
compassionate,
whimsical,
a laughter of lilacs,
an afternoon of roses:

you were
and still are
the philosopher
among us: the seeker,
the singer,
the poet of flowers:

you wove daises
and dusk
into dreams
for tomorrow,
you wove sunlight
and marigolds
into the fabric
of courage

for love
and for loving
you were one of a kind:
a laughter of lilacs,
an afternoon of roses

for Terry

if I were the sun
and you free to roam
all of a summer's afternoon,
I'd follow you
through fields
of golden grain
and across savannahs
of little blue-stem prairie
turned russet brown
in the breathing
of the season

I'd watch
as you paused
to rest beside a stream
with dragonfly
and monarch butterfly
perhaps to dream
of ages past,
perhaps
of summers yet to come

and the I'd watch you
walk along the edge of summer dusk
and give you to the moon
and ranging stars
to bring you home
from summer odyssey

for the children

wind blows cold
and icicles gleam,
stocking hang
and fire glows
candy canes
and mistletoe,
popcorn strings
and tangerines

eagerly
the children dream

For Walter Douglas

you are scientists,
psychotherapist and pastor,
but most deeply,
most devoutly
you are an artist
at the seeking out of human needs-

your care
for the human being
is exemplary-
it is the holistic caring
that encompasses
body and mind
and spirit-

you hold
that each human being
is sacrosanct,
that each human need
tells a story
that you cannot ignore

for you,
we are holy,
we are individuals,
each of us is an expression
of God's
abiding love

In memory of Robert Nichols

If you could see it, Bob,
The horse chestnut
We planted for you,
You would smile
That slow smile
Of yours,
Summon up
That mystique
Of your thought,
And marvel
At the wonderworks
Of the universal Lord

The leaves
Are a dark rich green,
The blossoms
Are a snowy
Saintly white,
A beauty
In and of itself
Suffusing
The warm spring air

Your spirit
Hovers here,
A gardener
Of blessings
And gratitude
For the miracle work
Of God

In memory of Yitzhak Rabin

you have fallen,
man of will,
man of peace,
man of fundamental decency

you loved
the basic man-
bare-boned,
cold in the wind,
driven through continents
of time,
searching
without rest

you knew
there is no enemy-
only man
and his dynamic needs-
only the human
bonded to the human

you have fallen,
but your bare-boned courage,
your name
in the ranging wind,
shall live forever

in my heart

(#6. Love Lyric)

in my heart

you glow
in my heart
like a summer's evening's
gathering of fireflies
across a shadowed lawn

you glow
in my heart
like a pale blue
winter moon
blossoming
in branches
of a winter tree

you glow
in my heart
like apple-blossom
petals
cascading
down the spillway
of June's long
summer afternoon

In the Bar

Mama, do you remember the Nesbits,
Just down the street:
Mrs. Nesbit's daughter going off
And never found:
Mrs. Nesbit rocking herself
To death on the front porch:
Where is Mrs. Nesbit, mama?
I love you so.
If you put your hair up in back,
You'd be prettier, mama.
Don't tell me that!
You're always harping at me,
Always harping!
Sally do this, Sally do that,
Sally turn about now!
At least my husband hasn't left me,
And where is yours?
Yes, mama, if you're so proud
And beautiful, where is he?
Where is your man, mama.
Mama, you know what, mama?
I hate you, mama.
I hate you, mama.
Bartender, where the hell are you?
I told you to bring me another drink,
But mama can't have one,
Can you, honey?
You've been a bad little girl,
Bad, bad, bad, mama.
Ha! Ha!
Now you want me to stop, don't you?
But I'll never stop now.
You think you can fool me
With that stone on top of you,
And those little wilted flowers?
But I know you.
You're too clever to die,
Ain't you, mama?
No, no: I know you.
Bartender, where the hell are you!

in the time of the drought

in a world of dust,
in a dusty flour sack,
you live
down by the drainage ditch

beside the blue-black
entrance
of the thatched hut
you play,
your body
thin as dust
beside the thirsty hen

there's a gray
wooden plank
across the ditch,
and it goes nowhere
and there's no water—
in a dry time
you are folded down
like a folded
forgotten blossom

The Last Days of Diana

Diana of the Dunes

It is hard, it has been so hard,
not to tell my pain:
No one, not Paul himself—
though he'd have me see a doctor—
knows how sick I truly am:
the haunting dreams,
the headaches
the silver whetted
blades of knives,
the fevered midnight sweats:
I am dying:
there's nothing I can do.

Paul?
He loves me:
Never man has loved a woman more:
He's a giant, a clumsy giant of a man,
my husband,
as full of temper
as a dune storm's full
of blowing sand; but loving?
He loves me purer than the sun!

He'd have me see a doctor
but I lie to him: I say
it is the winter wind of duneland
that makes my face so pale,
that makes my body shiver.

A doctor?
A doctor would stick me
in the hospital, take me,
uproot me from my very world
of dunes—pluck me like blue lupine
to die away, far and far away,
from the only parents I have known:
my mother the lake
and my father the northwest win.

Oh, that I should die at last
here where I have found
my truest life—
in this cosmos of the dunes
where I have known love.

lithium

why you rage at me,
my son,
I do not know,
your eyes
a cinder raking
of my heart,
your voice
a gleaming blade
across my throat

I do not know you,
you are mine, I think,
and yet
you tumble out of reach,
you fall whirling
past me
down winters,
and down Aprils
filled with blossom,
and down coldest
strangest summers
of the soul

I seek
a whispered word
of love,
a touch,
a clumsy brushing
of the hand—
but you have away
and left me
scorched
with cold

And left me
scorched
with cold

the lonely ones

you live
in the dark rooms
of a dark house
on the unrepaired
side of town

wild flowers
grow in your yard,
a tire swing,
long unused,
sways
in the June wind

we see you sometimes,
dressed like a little girl,
tending your flowers—
white companion
and golden Alexanders—
or sweeping sand
from the flagstones
of your walk

we are more afraid of you
than you are of us—
and so
when you try
to speak to us
we only stare
and hurry on—
in a darkness of our own

Love Poem

I would like
You to have
A little garden
Of spring flowers
So that you
Could know
Under sun's light
And under sun's warmth
How beautiful
You are.

My Dizzy Daughter

I watched her
Discover the sea:
Chubby-legged
And arms waving
Like clumsy first wings,
She squealed
At the startled gulls,
Kept falling
On her face
And turning up
With crystal
Of a candy sand
On her mouth:
She would sit
With curious challenge
At the wave's edge
And barely let her fingers
Touch the running chill
Of water:
Or caught by surprise
In the upswelling
Of a sudden tide,
She would roll on her side
With fright and laughter,
Look back
In amazement
At the wave's retreat,
Then frown at us
For explanation:
Before we could speak
A big one whapped her,
Spun her around,
And left her forever
Dizzy in love
With sun and the sand
And the sea.

My Grandmother

the sun came up
like a little
pinewood-flaring stove
in the kitchen of the world—

my grandmother,
rubbing sleep
out of her eyes,
still wrestling
with a firelight
of dreams,
pumped water
into the tea kettle,
and then sat quiet
as a silhouette
at the kitchen table

from the wood pile
a chameleon
gazed at her
with polite dismay,
and a silver spider
on a single
gold thread
dropped from the roof beam
to keep her company

the resin of pine
bubbled in the stove,
fronds of the bamboo
brushed softly
at the sun-glazed window,
and an ancient
sea turtle, with fierce humor
in his eyes,
clumped across
the morning
of the floor

Of the People Within Me

Once I was the kite's rag tail,
cutting a slice of white
from squint-blue April

Once I was a weeping tree,
bare brown branches spearing clouds

Once I am the molten marble
my question-crooked finger
stirring colors

Once I'll be the lilac's scent
a window-wafted message
from the purple-pulp of earth

And my memory will touch you
like dew on lilacs
like dew on lilacs.

Only Wild Stars

Who shall tell me
What he died for,
The reasons
For the going
Of the blood,
The black soaking
Of the earth
Beneath his head
Where tomorrow
Wild grass may grow?

Who shall tell me
Where his voice has gone,
What I can do
With syllables
Of empty wind,
What he can do
With little bones
Of birdsong
Breaking through
Tomorrow's empty tree?

Who shall tell me
Where his aspirations are,
His dreaming of a girl
With hands
As small as rye,
With eyes more broken
Than the lightning breaks?

Who shall tell me
Of the going
Of life's reasons
Into darknesses
That only wild stars
May know?

or a symphony

the prodding
of despair
is the groundwork
of existence

it is rough,
not smooth,
it tilts on you
and, not knowing why,
in least expected ways,
you lurch

you are falling
and trying to catch yourself,
you compose
a muscle
or a symphony

you don't do well
but maybe you do well enough—

you exist,
you say something,
you seek
to rebalance yourself,
you never yield
to darkness

you are human,
have eyes and hands,
an intellect to work with

you matter—
most of all,
you matter

out of your effort,
the shining of kingdoms

pigeon lady

Christmas Eve—
She sits alone, silent,
Her head faceless
In her hands
In the huge lobby
Of the huge hotel

Beside her,
At a distance,
A child stares
In curiosity,
A candy cane
Waving in his hand

Beside her,
At a distance,
A balsam
Blinks its lights
Through tinsel,
Pink gewgaws
Tarnish in the air

Chicago's pigeon lady
Dreams whole Aprils
Of birds
Curving from the blue
Of sky
To the park
Inside her heart
And to the warmest
Trembling of her hands

private school

he taught me Latin;
of Caesar he spoke—
and Horace; of Plutarch
he knew, Seneca and
the spilled precious
blood of life; of
cruelty

then,
the wrong
September day,
like the cognate "Exit"
in a drama
on a dim library shelf,
he died alone
in a dusty
dormitory room

and outside
in the yard
was only
a single yellow
willow

and inside,
in my student
room, there
would be
no telling
again
how Ovid died
or what
the ablative is

or even
how long
I could remember
the call number
of time

Progress Report, Aetat.5

Whispering.

A rustling in the plaster
As of hands groping,
Pleading, hidden.

Where has Harold gone?

Vacant rooms
Including only me.

Sleeping under blankets
Heavy and damp
As earth.

The attic
Through which the jailer prowled,
Then dropped down dusty stairs
To lock me in my dreams.

Where has Harold gone?

At twilight,
A mother calling
In a voice
Darker than love,
And then no answer.

A stone
Silvered and shadowed
By moon,
Silent
In the armless wind.

Who is screaming?

Pulse of the Rain

My grandfather,
Dirty out of the digging of ditches,
Welted and triumphant
Out of the roped ring
Where his arms
Worked faster than a shovel,
Courted his girl with the shy gentleness
Of a flower blooming in brambles
On a windy mountain-blue hill
In Ontario.

He recited Burns, and named the trees—
White pine and maple and shimmer of tamarack—
And feared
To put his arm upon her shoulder.
Birds scattered through the woods
Where they walked, boxer and this puzzle
Of ringleted girl,
In his stutter of silence.
Curious squirrels
Looked at them
With a sly wagging of tails.

But one afternoon, forgetting himself
As suddenly as rain had swept
Spring clouds down at them,
He hugged her dry against himself
And listened in amazement to her heart
As frantic as his against him.
To such a rain
He owed embrace
Of countless days
Of sun and misty weather—
Pressed indistinguishably
Into the rhythm of happiness.

Roy Gibbons

In Memoriam

Of carbon his mind was made,
Pressed to the brilliance
Of diamond thought,
So that he shone
With a belief
Not common for man:
In the star
Exploded eons ago
That still bestows light
On the wondering eye;
In the leaf
Transmuting
Molecular earth
And photons of undying sun
To the miracle called manna;
To the electron
Circling
The solar nucleus
Like a planet
Lost
In giant spaces
Of matter:
In all these
He found reason
For belief,
For faith
In the science of mystery,
For sure, unfaltered steps
To the shining City of God.

The Seasons Following Death

I
Winter days make a difference to her
now
in the fifth-floor, bare-floored apartment
overlooking the city:
snow passes and repasses
(in an upwhirled flurry)
her window
and memories
are like those first
single flakes that go out like lights
on the dark stone
of the sill outside;
she sits
for moments watching summer die

II
or is it lonely
getting back at six o'clock
in spring
with just that twilight
which makes the corners of the
rooms
as deep as wishes;
there are always days
when her girlhood asks for another
chance,
when fresh leaves and the voices
of the street
confuse her for a lonely moment
but then she cooks snap beans
and a pork chop for dinner

III
sometimes in dreams
beside the at-last fullness of summer
taunting her with richness
she runs in her light sleep away
till she finds her parents
speechless with their love,
and wakes
beside the bare wall
and the window made of summer

IV
autumn comes in with a kick,
a good high wind rattling way
down
in the wahoo bush beside the
apartment,
where children play oblivious
of bruises
got in fun,
and she throws back a ball
rolled far away;
there is laughter

Spastic

Wrestled down
Into his wheelchair,
Arms and legs
Bunched
Against his body,
His eyes slow
An animal,
His voice
A begging for clarity:

He wheels himself
With gross effort
And indecent body,
Herculean,
Down the hall:

Everyone has some place,
Travel is between
Two points:
Somewhere there must be stillness:
But whenever I see him,
Hands welded to the wheels,
He is moving,
Never still:
Home eludes him,
Dark somewhere
In the trembling
Of his mind.

slipped beyond you

I have slept
under the stars,
the high and turning
summer stars
gazing down at me
like a mystic
nature father

I have listened
to the rain
pattering
across a sheet
of newsprint,
whispering
the arrival
of the spring

in the fall
I have lain
in places
of the nodding
long grasses
and heard
the speaking
of the wind

I say to you—
I have slipped
beyond you—
I am the homeless
of this world

Speak Easy

My grandfather, who read Aquinas,
Stole out at night
And spoke easily to the women
In the speakeasies:
His wife fretted,
Listened to soap operas
With all of that exhausted loneliness
She could muster for an afternoon,
And said, "Father, I am through."
But he never heard.

His own father, minister
Itinerant (picking up handouts
Each Sunday for the boy to wear
And eat—who hated the world—
The religious bigots
Who clothed him in the oil of their unction:
"Such a sweet boy!")
Had said in his pulpit one
unambiguous
Sunday morning:
"Prohibition is a violation
Of the Nature of Man."

The people cried in ecstatic horror,
The press victimized its hero,
And finally a throat-ticked synod
Acquitted him by a vote of One
And demoted him to limbo.

Grandfather, with that flower in
his buttonhole
And the girls on his arms,
Must have thought the speakeasy
a limbo:
He quoted James Whitcomb
Riley
And Thomas Aquinas with fer-
vor;
He sinned with joy.

And at last sobered up enough
To die and be buried
In a rite
That was, in my child eyes,
Like the inclusive world—
Confucian, Jewish, Catholic, and
even Protestant—
Everything he read and loved
On quiet Sunday mornings
When his wife, fearfully,
Loved him and tried to under-
stand.

Steady Drift

It is the darkness of night,
A middle August
Interval of dreams: the window
Is open
Where elm leaves
Brush against the screen,
And now and then
Fireflies wheel by
In little soundless lightning:
Through the leaves
The streetlamp glows
Like changing shadow:
I am awake,
Restive in reminders
of yesterday:
Beside me, she turns
Now and then
In troubled sleep,
Her breathing
In its build and fall
A part of calm
Of summer's night;
I touch her shoulder
To see what thoughts
My fingers know,
And there is warmth
But never telling:
To love and not to know,
Close as this,
A moment's rustle
Of the sheet between,
And lost to feel
How to rest her
In the arms of comfort.
I lie amazed
At the steady drift
Of stars and lives.

stroke

your body
is cast;
it is a door
to stranger topography;
it is memory,
a gold-braided
album
found on an attic floor

on this landside—
here—
I do not recognize
myself;
I slip, I stumble—
in a tangle
of phrases
and nerve
I falter dark

and then
in that one, that
single
next-to-impossible
move,
like the move
of tectonic plates,
in a movement
brief
as the brush
of a word—
you smile

you lie beyond me
in half-life
your eyes
wet with words
not spoken
move toward me,
follow me
down halls
endlessly silent

within you,
the soul is pure,
active, radiantly
bright,
sun-shone crystal,
a bird perched
on a summer twig,
an idea
fine-honed
as the idea
of God

Summer Meeting

Was it summer's heat
Or peculiar stillness
Of the heavy air—
A breathlessness
That dropped a languor
Through all my body?
A subtle melancholy
Suffused my limbs,
A sadness came
To taunt my heart:

Powerless of other feeling
At first sight of her:
Her skin so light
It shone almost translucent
Against the dark corn silk
Of her hair that curved
To rest unmoving
On her shoulders;
Eyes deep and forlorn
With a passionate hunger
As still as summer sky,
Calling for nothing,
Yielding nothing,
A poise of thought
The heart cannot divulge.

She moved and did not move:
Time slowed to stand
As she passed me: beauty
I had never seen,
Leaving with slowest leaving
Into a world apart,
Her place
A namelessness
I'd never felt before.

Truant

It was my city when I was young,
And I knew it for a friend
Whose high windy nights
Above the sprinkling of yellow windows
Tore out of me, as with a song,
Last bits of loneliness.
Or whose sun
Falling in autumnal patterns
Through trees of a park
Gave me early the sense of being old
As the quiet men
Upon the quiet benches
Their eyes broken with yesterday's newsprint,
Their hearts cupping life at the brim.
Or I would go to watch
The black power of trains
Under their startling wreaths of steam
Pull in at last
To yards
Where flames leapt at icy switches
And men with cold-blue words
And wind-whiskeyed faces
Guided them, with the patience of a mother,
To rest.

US

the university
takes its name
from oneness
and wholeness
and a world's breadth
of view—
but also from difference,
and diversity,
and the challenge
of the single intellect

here, at thirty-one,
the mother
of two disabled children—
she seeks
new pathways
through neural intersections

here, for his own improvement,
a retired engineer—
he builds bridges
with Platonic ideas

here, half Chippewa,
she once more
distills a remedy
from the intricate leaf
of the yarrow

here, from brutal history,
he gives himself
a new name
and stands with pride
identified

here, part Aztec,
she studies
the heart's blood
of true revolution—
courage
and determination
and undying will

out of such mixture
comes all the world
and the dynamics
of love—

US

the visiting room—state prison

out of all
sadness
I have never seen
eyes like yours:

they are
wounded birds,
wing-crippled
in midsummer,
hugging
the perilous pavement

you stand
in dark blue
of the prison uniform,
your arm
around your husband's
shoulders,
the photographer
poised
like a man
with the gun

you are terrified still,
your heart flutters
like the wing
of a bird,
a light flicks,
your eyes
return to darkness

weeping woman

through the darkness,
through the moon-shadows
of reeds
along the river,
in the call
of cicada and cricket,
in the trembling of wind
she walks grieving:

in the night
she calls out, "My children!
My children!
My love, O
my love!"

and she walks
vanishing and weeping
through the night,
and a meteor
streaks like a dagger
down the dark
of the sky

Widow, Aet. 23

What have I
But all and everything
And what more
Can be given?
As in a dream
I become a child again
To count the gifts
Of deathday
And learn again
The curtsey
Of a "thank you"
To my elders:
For the flag
I give thanks;
For the citations,
I give thanks;
For the sympathies
Of ringing phone
And cartoned soups,
I give thanks;
For nightletters
Whose lines still writhe
Like moondark snakes
In the liquid of my eye:
For this,
For all of these,
I make curtsey
To Authority,
A child again
Who must learn again
And once again
The wisdom and the kindness
Of the State.

witness

I was a witness
And my friend the Serb—
About-to-become-citizen,
With his dancing hands
And too tense laugh,
Sat down beside me;
Across the room stood Nobody
We had ever seen before
Nor would ever see again:
Eighty years of rough-worn
White-haired life
Some time in his boyhood perhaps
Come out of Europe
Unhindered as a pasture gale
To the prairied width of America:
Explaining he has no two friends,
No two witnesses,
Is alone, daughter dies who knows him,
Is last,
Everyone gone now, dead now:
I looked at my friend the Serb
Whose hands curled into his pockets,
Whose feelings slipped suddenly
Out of reach.
And somebody would come in soon
And ask me alone who I was—
Could I support myself in such a country?

Religion

Architect of Love

The church
Extends
Beyond pews,
Beyond walls,
To whatever God has bidden,
Master everlasting Architect
Manifest
In rise of sun
Spreading earth
With highlight gold of morning;
In green leap
Of the poplar
Rooted dark
And tipped with sky;
In flower of the lilac
Parading royal blue
Amid heart-shape
Of its leaves;
In low arc
Of the blackbird
Over reeds
That sing with wind:
In whatever can be loved
For beauty's sake,
For sake of Him.

untitled

the aspen leaf
trembling
in the blue
of summer air—
single and alone,
yet sister
to all leaves
and the warmth
of endless sun—
this you know
as deep green truth

the human being
splendid and
singly bent
upon his way—
yet born
of all his ancestors,
filled with all
their voices,
even to the ancient sun—
this you know
as most human
of all truth—

your knowing
is a warmest way
of believing

beneath the gold

at the center
is the mystery,
is the riddle,
is the wonder—
are the days
of my life—
how shall
I fashion them?

once they were
alleys of the springtime
down which I wandered
as a child,
then they were summers
of the spirit
as I grew
beneath the gold
of the sun,
now they are
the fine, vibrant
days of autumn
crowding me
with color,
touching me
with the spirit
of joy—

still at the center
is the mystery,
the riddle,
the puzzle
of my ignorance—
but still
I am fulfilled
with the wondrous beauty
of everything—
I believe
that my days
are fashioned
by God

beyond the moment

in the long, long
unrelenting effort
to touch my heart,
the spirit,
with a word,
with a phrase,
with an architectonic
of thought,
lies man's
truest will,
his richest ambition,
to overcome time,
his deepest defiance
of limit
and death

with a word,
with a phrase,
he can ride
the humor, the peril
of his earth-wrought
condition,
he can soar
beyond the moment
of change
to a country
fixed purely
in thought—
where love
and where courage
become purer
and finer,
where humanity
is no longer
a question of time

Birmingham

I remember
how you went down—
how you fell
across time
and all the clocks
stopped
on a Sunday morning—

the pews shone
in a soft oak light—
the collection plates
were ready,
and the Lord
was looking on—

He picked you up
in the wonder
of His arms
and is teaching you still
the love
of a Sunday School
that never ends

a child's silent cry

the world hurts

it never stands
too far away—
it is cold
and vacant
and indifferent

and then,
coming on the silence
of cat feet,
it strikes
with fury's force—

it is an unevenness
in the temperament
of man—
it is the short-circuiting
of a synapse—
it is the cub
hanging limp
from the lion's
fierce jaw

O, Lord,
we are afraid
of ourselves,
we are afraid
for ourselves

O Lord,
we need your special
guidance

now
and forevermore

teach us
O, Lord,
to understand
how vulnerable
our children are
in the dark immensity
of this universe

Church at Notre Dame

The windy blue sun
Of twilight
Falls silent
Through oaks
And gold-yellow
Of sycamore
To poise
On stained glass
Of the windows,

Vines reach high
Along the limestone
Side, figures
Of aspiration
In sharp, warm
Light:
A sparrow,
Its feathers
A blur of wing,
Perches skyward
On a dreaming
Buttress:

Such beauty
Is embrace,
A touching
Of the awed soul,
A work of light
In telling silence.

the empire of hope

the sky was shrouded
in darkness
a chill rode
on the wind
there was a skittering
of mice in the straw
as shepherds slept
by their flocks

the oxen and the horses
moved uneasily
the goats were no longer
munching their hay

in the gloom,
in the darkness
gleamed the face
of a child just born
a light shone about Him
in glorious splendor
and His mind
and His heart
held the hope
of the world

kings and angels
and lowly shepherds
would come to gaze
upon Him
and He would establish
an empire of love
that would endure
millennium
after celestial millennium

untitled

Faint as breath
On a Bible page
She said to me,
"Do they hold services here?'
Bent over her cart
As rigidly
As struts
Of wire
Bind the basket
To gleaming use:

Do they hold services here?
And I looked again
And saw lettuce, pears,
And bread in cellophane,
Peaches in their labeled cans,
Tea, and pomegranates,
And soups of infinite variety:
And asked myself,
Do they hold service here
For late Saturday people
Just off the rained-down street
Who are bent
As much as age?

She was waiting beside me
In the supermarket
Of the earth,
And yes, I said, Yes:
they hold services here, I said,
And everything's all right:
And why not try our special:
Souls at discount,
Only slightly damaged,
In aisle four
Beside the instant breakfast.

First Confession

Blood thudded in my ears. I scuffed,
Steps stubborn, to the telltale booth
Beyond whose curtained portal coughed
The robed repositor of truth.

The slat shot back. The universe
Bowed down his cratered dome to hear
Enumerated my each curse,
The sip snitched from my old man's beer,

My sloth pride envy lechery,
The dime held back from Peter's Pence
With which I'd bribed my girl to pee
That I might spy her instruments.

Hovering scale-pans when I'd done
Settled their balance slow as silt
While in the restless dark I burned
Bright as a brimstone in my guilt

Until one feeds birds he doled
Seven Our Fathers and a Hail
Which I to double-scrub my soul
Intoned twice at the altar rail

Where Sunday in seraphic light
I knelt, as full of grace as most,
And stuck my tongue out at the priest:
A fresh roost for the Holy Ghost.

Fusion

Sounds delight the ear,
Inform the mind—
From tragic chords
To lightest melody
Rippling surfaces of feeling
With sun-swift grace:

Between the solemn life-thread of Beethoven
And the singing steps of Tchaikovsky
Moves the liturgical procession of Bach
With polyphony of joy and sorrow
As at that fusion of all life feeling—
The Passion of a God
Made human.

God of the Duneland

(for Jim Yackel)

it is a place
of many flowers
of many grasses—
the silver blades
of little blue stem,
the petals of Indian blanket
marram grass
glistening in the sun,
black-eyed Susans
rioting yellow
and cone dark
in the summer air

and through it all
in eerie silence,
banked by all
the colors of this earth,
runs a river
almost sacred
in its various transforming
blues

and I know the life
that dwells here
in the high June air—
butterflies and dragon flies
and the white miller moth
bouncing from one sweet blossom
to another

this is an enchanted garden,
sending up a blazing star,
blending the reality and mystery
of ancient moon-tide
to dissolve me, transform me
to the timeless world
of nature

I stand
as on a beach
left here
by a monumental glacier
ages before
my own finite time
it is here that I feel
so alone,
so single and deserted,
so puzzled by immensity

but it is here that I can
think and dream,
in an age I hardly know,
it is now
that I can become
a companion
to the omnipotent
ever-caring Lord

untitled

it is a quality
of light,
it is a glowing
suffused richly
to the air,
it is the gold-red
of sunset west,
it is the after rain
of the petals
and the rose

and you are these,
all these,
and something more:

you are a glowing
that takes us richly up
to a world of special light:
a world
of green, green grass
and apple days,
a world
of children
cartwheeling
through golden afternoons,
a world
of still and summer dusk
where hummingbird
seeks out
rich nectar of the hollyhock

keep me true

in the day,
in the dark,
in wave after wave,
of sorrow and grief,
water has come
and brought darkly with it
the whole sense of loss—

the sodden doll
lying where she left it,
the kitten gone,
the wedding album
black as driftwood,
poinsettia
leaf and blossom
drowned,
uncomprehending tears
in the Christmas face
of my child

O Lord,
keep me straight
and true

Mass for the ill

the rains have come down
from the mountains
and fall on us here
as we move,
slowly and in silence
through the yard
of the church

we are the women
in a long dark line,
like the lash
of a whip—
we are the wanting ones,
the needing ones,
come here
to sing and to pray

in my dark shawl
(the only thing I have
worthy of the Lord),
in the pain
that runs
like sharp lightning
along muscle, nerve, and bone,
turning my hands
into claws,
I feel the rains
come down from the mountains
and I know
the silence
of the world

the Muse

I seek the voice
of these woods,
the calling out
of the wind
in these leaves
and these branches
of sky—the smooth
green singing
of the willow,
the sieve-like
whisper
of pines,
and back
in the marshes
the faint
high ringing
of the peepers—
and under all,
in dark corners
of moss and bramble
and burr,
in the cat's-paw
night-prowl
of fox and raccoon—
the low green
murmur of time

this is a temple
of many voices,
a temple
without walls,
without roof,
without altar—
each leaf
is a sounding board,
each petal
of wild rose
is an echo—

and we can
do no better
than stand here
and listen—
at the center of beauty
is life
and the unchanging Word

One

amoeba,
maple leaf,
hawk's wing,
petal of the apple flower,
body of the bear,
synopsis of development—

all, all are fragile,
vulnerable,
born, becoming, being—

in each, the cell
is a universe
beyond reckoning—
filled with the unchanging
fire of God,
strung
with the brilliant
incandescent threads
that tie all being
to One

pauper's cemetery

unknown woman,
oh, woman known
only to God
I pray for you
as for the fall
of the sparrow,
as for the leaf
glowing close
at your window,
as for the rose
blossoming full
at your heart,
as for God's love
to enshrine you
in perfect
everlasting light

prayer

here I lie
in the warm earth
of the gold noon sun,
a calla lily
springing beside me,
rooted
as I am,
natural
as I am

I acted
for myself,
I was brutalized,
with his filthy hands
he took the seed
from me

I had never known
such pain

I bled

please remember me

the sun,
the warm sun,
the lily,
the natural lily,
are my fair companions

in silence now
I ask you
not to judge:

only consider
the enormity
of human loss,
the agony,
the being so alone

do not forget
this prayer

syllable

no matter how distant,
how lowly
the birth—

no matter the gifts—
ball of twine
or bird to sing,
fragrance of myrrh
or the splendor
of gold,

no matter the place
or season—
beside the haunting
wind of the desert
or deep in the flowering glow
of the rain forest—

each child is derived
from God,
is echo and syllable
of the Divine,
is part of the knowing
and praise
of the Lord—

bless the child
and you bless Him

the temple

love is
clear, forthright
observation

it is a willingness
to yield,
to defer the self

it is the whole
growing
of the flower
under the thin light
of the spring sun

love can not be added
love can not be subtracted
it is the invariable constant

it is a girl playing jacks
it is a boy playing stick ball
it is the sun
rising slow
through the stem
of the rose

it occurs in time
yet it lies outside time

it is touching
of bodies,
yet it ends as a touching
of souls

it can not be caught
any more than the wind
can be caught

it is elusive
as the grace
of silk

it leads
down many corridors
to the temple
of peace

Untitled

we are fragile,
we break easily,
we are paler
than new grass,
tentative
as a word just spoken,
a whisper
in the night

we are not less
nor more
than human,
we depend upon you
for nurture,
for love,
for mercy

for us
you are
all the gathering
of power
and wisdom
into one heart,
into one mind

you are
the first original world
in which we cry
and sing
and come to balance
upon spindly legs,
upon spindly feelings

we are shadows
behind the midnight door,
we are as sacred
as the petals
lit by morning sun

Wearied by Joy

(Headline: "Stray Bullet Kills Nun in Her Sleep")

Though I have died
By a bullet
Spun awry
Through wood and brick
Of ghetto
(Stray piece of metal
Piercing the window
Of my dreams),
I cannot feel the loss
Except for those
I leave behind: the children
Who strayed in and out
Of love I gave:
Weep not for me,
Who knew the richness,
Every day,
Of giving what was Christ
In me, of suffering
The weariness
Not of body's movement
But of heart's:
My happiness exhausted me
Til there was little
Left to die:
To watch
The going of the fear
From the eyes
Of but a single child
Is to step
With lightest step
Into eternity.

Miscellaneous

Eight Places of Anxiety

On the edge
Of a word
Unspoken.

In the flattened out,
Unhidden space
Of fields
Without feature.

Under the slow roll
Of gulls
Biding amazing time
Above the city's dumping ground.

A balloon
Driven by hitching wind
From place
To wayward place.

The track
That blood makes
Away from the chance
Of accident.

In a Bible
To the page
Of an old woman's
Careful shaky script
Recording the last birth.

In the darkness
Of the repossessed shell
Of the hermit crab.

Beneath the rumor
Of rain
Avalanching down the sky.

End of the Day

With beer stains on the table
And the long history of each of us
Incoherently stretched out
Into morning hours
When chickens in farmyards
Are beginning to stir,
And the street sweeper tosses
Heavily in sleep,
We talk with sheer sham
Honestly (who knows himself?).
It is the kind of night
When, entering another,
We hope the gold bubbly cold
Liquid soothing us toward sleep
Holds an answer;
But we stare blankly
With hollow recognition
Of failures repeated over and over and over.
We go to find eggs and ham and toast
To hold us to earth for another day.
And see the empty bottles of ourselves
Back on the ring-around wet table
In some dark tavern downtown.

last days

the sun
and the moon
turned away,
the flower boats
withered
in a pale ghostly fire—
and we ate
whatever we could—
corn leaves and lizards
and saltgrass

and then the voice
of the wind
dropped down,
and there was silence

so, in a moment,
an empire fell—
in our mouths
we knew
the bitter taste
of time

the metal men,
on their great beasts
and with lances
sharper than
the mountain wind,
struck us down
as frost strikes down
the flowers
in a fair field,
in a fair season

our stems cracked,
our blossoms fell—
young warrior and old fell
into the darkness
of waters,
into the darkness
of a moonless
blowing night

some of us survived
for a slow bitter time

more than One

let us dream
a world
a stone and a leaf
and put them together
with judgment

let us dream
a world
a petal and sun
and put them together
with love

let us dream
a world
a light and a spirit
and put them together
with wisdom

let us be One
and much more than One

Morning for Flowers

The old woman, her hair
The sun-shone white of snow,
A left-over smile of girlhood
Tucked in the curve of her wrinkles,
Waters plants each morning
Along the edge of her 1890 porch.

Her eyes are old stars
Faint in a dawning sky,
Her hands are the tremble
Of butterflies in summer wind,
Petunias, salvia, geranium
Make a small paradise for her feet.

Each summer, before the wither
Of her house, in the winter
Of her age,
She waters flowers,
Of her brave Elysius.

The Neophytes

I never was
In any circle
Of Dante's Hell,
But I did go
To West Madison
With a Jeepful of food
After the riots:
Smoke still played
Along the streets
In wayward gusts
Of April wind:
In crumble of brick,
Splinter and slash of board,
Fire still twisted:
Air was strong with sweat of
fear:
From the church door
People extended down the block
Like cold still chain,
Silent link to silent link.
As we unloaded cans, cartons,
boxes
("Add milk, heat, stir"),
A girl stared
With angry eyes
As at a picture
In a book too nice
For belief:
I felt her tear us out
And crumple us
To nothing.

Order

At the all-night counter
In the delicatessen
Somewhere in this city
(Where everybody at least
Once in his life
Goes emptily after crisis—
To sit alone
And stare into his life),
When you order a hamburger
With mustard-pickle-relish-
ketchup,
The counter girl
Turns without a thought
And calls: "A lonely everything."
When the order comes sliding
Down the empty counter,
You smile scornfully
At the shrivel of pickle,
And taking up the fragments of
your life
Go out on springing steps
To see what the stars are doing.

the panhandle—1937

sunrise
the broken little town

in cracks
across main street
light searches out
lambs quarters
peppergrass
smartweed

spiders blink
as the web tightens

an old weathervane
with rusted tail feathers
turns to nowhere

a gas pump
leans uncertain
at the empty street
and windows
blind with light
look down
like secret eyes

nesting mice
get homesick here
as clouds
of later morning
gather
for a purple storm

the pre-socratics

from water
to water

in a dry spell
air would do just as well

o.k.,
herakleitos,
you were right:
it does change

Assignment:
prove that the Idea
of a rabbit
could easily
win a race
with the Idea
of a tortoise
(but not vice versa)

in a universe
in which there is
no empty space
everything would be possible
(or maybe it's
the other way
around)

for the sake of others
do not eat beans
and for heaven's sake
please shake
the impress of your body
out of your bedsheet
(or maybe it's
vice versa)

if everything
is made of atoms,
so what?

if not now,
Epicurus,
then when?

the secret of ontology:
bubbly hot mud

privilege

"No man hath affliction enough that is not matured, and ripened by it . . ."—John Donne, "Meditation XVII"

a handicap is an irrelevant
and needless thing,
but if you have your choice,
get yourself one

it teaches you some aloneness,
some facts,
some differences from other people
that you might fear at first
but love at last

you have a chance to observe
from the outside
and to learn
how not to pity yourself—
a healthy lesson

and eventually, through all
this growing,
you discover that everybody,
being human,
is handicapped by the problem
of learning to live wisely:

more properly called
the privilege of learning
to love wisely

recovery act—1935

from an old
red wagon
on an old
depression street
we sold lemonade
and lilacs
in homemade
paper cups

the magic had gone
from our grandfathers'
skinny sleeves,
shovels lay empty
in damp roadside ditches
and curly-headed
Shirley Temples
numbed our world
with song and dance and sneeze

we would have
sold the sun too
for three cents apiece
but it ran too hard for us
and demand
had dwindled down
had dwindled down

Revolution

today
we celebrate
the coming to be
of a nation,
the birth
of a people,
the conceiving
of democracy—

out of the florid power
and alcoholism
of tyranny,
out of the blood
of more
than a million
fallen,
out of the skulls
that still lie
transfixed and pale
under a desert moon,
out of woman courage
and woman courage
and woman grief,
after the ripping
of bullets
and ideas,
after the speechifying
and assassinations,
and all the dishonesty,
after all the inhumanity
done to the campesini
and the children,
after the lies
and the fixing of ballots,
after the fraud
of pretending to be human,
we have a taste
in our mouths,
in our hearts
of what democracy
most truly signifies,
the rule of the people,
the wisdom of the people,
government
that can be sustained
only through the will
of the people—
a mandate of hope—
a revolution that takes place
not in the face of the cannon
but along the neural pathways
and across the synapses
of the newly wakened mind

Seven Ways of Having

a wire basket
in a public park

a child
pulling
at the knees
of time

vines
of the grape
turning
the oak
to shadow

leaves
rustling down
blue currents
of October air

silver rails
curving
at a freight

a torn
lace curtain
blowing
from an empty window

Smoke

Suburbia sits on summer twilight porches
Indolent as the heat
Still rising from the walks.
A plane, mechanical firefly,
Drones slowly overhead.
There is talk of children,
Collision insurance,
Recipes for happiness.
The smell of new-cut grass
Aches in the nostril.
Stars prick through
The dome of growing darkness
One by distant one.
A dog barks
Somewhere neighborhoods away.
At what?
Porches empty
And go slowly up to dreams,
Like smoke
From some forgotten fire.

untitled

somewhere,
like a flowering
of lilac
or a blossoming
of high and higher star,
amid all the desert
of this desert cold
a child cries,
a child beckons us
to know
the warmth and gold
of purest sun—
undying—
at the crossroads
of December and eternity

Street Scene

Women stand slipshod
in bright doorways;
women in limp frocks

Women stand slipshod
in bright doorways;
women in limp frocks
sit bored in bright windows,
the hand cradling
the impassive face.

A girl in a chemise
made of dishcloths
skips along the curb
from one brazen patch
of streetlamp to another.

A car rifles past,
reverses in a shiver of metal,
parks with a squeal.
A woman pulls a shade,
a doorway blinks out.

The singer in the cellar bar
pauses for a dim blue horn.
The summer moon the summer stars
on eternal sightless course
turn slowly overhead.

untitled

the sun
climbing gold
up the morning side
of skyscrapers

the El
turning
in a flash
of silver sound
along a curve
of track

the atom
silent, sober
poised
for the peace
of tomorrow

freights—grain—
cars—steel—
the flaming stars
of catalyst crackers

marble stairways,
wooden steps,
terraces of rose

the tenement
drifting
through long afternoons,
curtains flapping
like torn sails

the lake
hurling
in blue-grey September
against the moonscape
stones of shore

neon taverns
flickering
with the hunger
of lives
untamed

a construction worker
writing a poem
on a girder
of blue sky

from man, woman,
black, white,
Czech, Irish,
Latino—
a new fire,
a molten idea,
a dream
almost ready
to touch

Chicago

Ten Ways of Saying Hello

Automated,
Because you don't exist.

As in a dream,
Simply to an image
Of yourself.

Not the word, but
The inflection,
Hint of what
Cannot be told.

In the morning,
A need
To recombine yourself
To being.

Because the weather's
Undistinguished
And nothing else
Occurs to you.

Down a hall,
On a walk—
In franker times—

A challenge.

Hardly heard,
Rather featured.

Touching another heart,
By mystery,
To the glow
Of greeting.

To love
And say nothing
Since the lips still are
Without the word.

the used-to-be

morning rise
gray blues
and pale gold
building on the silent
eastern windows
of this town

once again
the tree sheds
its dream
the building shade
its fantasy
of night
dew dries
like shrunken cord

once again
the old stir
in their beds
dream-ride
settling slow
to a dullness
in the chest
the namelessness
of yet another day

a child cries
in a basement
apartment
once more
the doors
of the bus garage
swing wide
a train whistle
echoes
from the used-to-be
of prairie flowers

we are not ugly
it's just
tucked in little
low gray rooms
you will not see us
know us back to our-
selves

Untitled

Under
The light snow
Falling, falling
Over the city
White as a bride,
The delicatessen stands
Luminous and trim
On the corner.
It is midnight!
One star
Peers unshaken
Through the clouds.
And the silence
Folding round the delicatessen
Is fragile as a flake of snow.
Inside, the jukebox blares,
A waitress shakes out coffee grounds,
And a policeman talks unheard
To a man bent double
At a table.

that which is most precious
is the soul
it resides somewhere, somehow
in all of us;
it patiently abides its time;
it observes closely;
it is a prisoner of the flesh—
bone and cartilage; nerve and
artery

listening to the soul is essential;
caring for the soul is essential;
it is stronger than the heart;
it can overpower the mind

it waits;
it must be nurtured;
the nurturing of the soul
is the highest art of man;
it cannot be done in a day—
even half an eternity
is too short for it;
it never complains—
it waits

what nourishes the soul?
butterfly wings
in the whispering winds
of summer;
the long slow lapping of waves
against the shore;
the sleek swift dolphin
that cuts ocean water
in half;
the voice
of poplar leaves
as they brush
against the wind;
the distant chant
of a Chippewa dance
under the spell
of the new full moon;
the golden fall of leaves
through the silence
of a virgin forest;
the invisible whir
of hummingbird wings;
the haze
that hovers along
on early morning river;
the fiery lavenders
of the newborn sun
the soul is the center
the soul is all inclusive
the soul speaks in a silence of
words
the soul
can be nurtured
only by
the most devout
of artist

What I want to say to him

I am broke, son.
No happiness is in my pockets,
The days when your mother and me
Ate potatoes
And hungered for the new day
Like two absurdly beautiful lovers
Living on love
Are gone.

We are gone now, and take you with us,
Into the alien land
Of appearances
Where life lives in the skin,
In propriety forever,
In the always ready smile
That like an ad
Proves our nice friendship
With people we can use.

There's money in my pockets now,
A lot of change
Jingling against my thigh
With every step
Into this siren land-
Today's music, son,
But my music, too.
I am sorry, son, I am sorry.

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